

The book cover features a large white circle in the upper half, containing the text 'LIVES OF THE ARTISTS, LIVES OF THE ARCHITECTS' in blue serif font, with each word on a separate yellow rectangular background. Below this, a red circle with white diagonal stripes contains the author's name 'HANS ULRICH OBRIST' in blue serif font, also on yellow rectangular backgrounds. The background of the cover is divided into two horizontal sections: the top section has a blue and white woven geometric pattern, and the bottom section has a blue and white wavy pattern.

LIVES
OF THE
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OF THE
ARCHITECTS
HANS
ULRICH
OBRIST



Hans Ulrich Obrist

LIVES OF THE ARTISTS, LIVES OF THE
ARCHITECTS



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Introduction

Everything started with Peter Fischli and David Weiss. I was born in May 1968 in Zurich and then again seventeen years later when, as a teenager, I met Peter and David. It was the beginning of a neverending conversation with artists. My other important source of inspiration was Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, especially because he doesn't differentiate between artists and architects and sees some of his contemporaries as historic figures.

The book that convinced me I had to record my conversations with artists was *The Brutality of Fact* which gathered the interviews David Sylvester had done with Francis Bacon over many decades. Although I'd had many exchanges with artists, I only started to record them around 1991–1993 thanks to Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Felix thought it was too formal to sit in a TV studio, as we had done, and he said we needed to find a more informal way of having a conversation, just record it as if we were in a café. That led to the format I have used ever since, and I have these conversations wherever they can happen.

Then Rosemarie Trockel told me later that she thought it was important to talk to a range of people – not only artists of my own generation, or of my own time, but also pioneers in their eighties, nineties and one hundreds, and to make sure I recorded their memories, which could be seen as a protest against forgetting.

I would always use the word 'conversation' rather than 'interview' for what I do – once it starts it is infinite and doesn't stop. It can also be that sometimes one just has to come up with a different format. Such is the case with Hans-Peter Feldmann, who was in my first kitchen show, and with whom I have been working and curating projects for more than twenty-five

years. Throughout this friendship he always resisted the idea of a recorded conversation until about five years ago when we decided that I would send him a question by email and he would answer with an image. It has continued ever since. I did something similar with Louise Bourgeois: I would send her a question and she would answer by emailing back a drawing.

Early on, Alighiero Boetti encouraged me to ask not only what artists can do in the existing structures, but what they *would like* to do. He told me that artists are often invited to do the same thing over and over – solo and group shows in museums, biennales and galleries – but there are so many other possibilities, so many other projects that they might want to do. This is why I often ask about their unrealized projects.

So I think the key thing is to listen; in a way conversations are all about being able, or learning, to listen. Hearing about these unrealized projects is for me maybe the most important thing because then I can sometimes help make them happen.

In a way, I've been thinking about these conversations as if they were a garden – Thomas Bayrle told me early on that you need different 'knowledge gardens'. After I did my first kitchen show in 1991, I needed such a garden of research that would give me new ideas, and that's when I started to do conversations with scientists, architects, poets and novelists, so that there would always be parallel things I would do, or parallel realities. I've got about 2,500 hours now and they can obviously be categorized in different ways.

I hope this version, this collection of nineteen conversations with artists and architects from all over the world, which is a small fragment of the archive, can be a toolbox of creative thought. We have brought together art and architecture (as Vasari did in the original *Lives of the Artists*) because keeping disciplines together is more urgent; often the connections between supposedly different areas are the most inspiring, and many of the figures here have worked in a variety of disciplines. This book aims at going beyond the fear of pooling knowledge.

Hans Ulrich Obrist

DAVID HOCKNEY

Hockney has three different studios: one in Bridlington, East Yorkshire, one in South Kensington, and one in Los Angeles. In 2006 I made my first visit to South Ken, and then Hockney invited me to Bridlington. What follows contains extracts from the conversations we had during both of these studio visits. When we met, Hockney had just moved back to Yorkshire after a long stay in Los Angeles, where he has his third studio, and the interview covers all three studios and how, rather than belonging to one place, Hockney works with the geography of each to create his paintings.

Hockney has always been a painter, but when we met he was becoming interested in technology and how digital technology can be a tool for an artist. He has always been interested in mediums beyond painting, including making films and writing books, but he also makes digital paintings, on his iPhone and iPad; but of course he always returns to painting. Painting never stops.

Mass media/social media

DAVID HOCKNEY: The image is very powerful and very memorable.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *It's quite early on in the film [Fritz Lang, Metropolis, 1926].*

DH: They all live underground by the end of the film and this is what struck me: if you film a crowd with one camera they're one mass, but if you film it with eighteen cameras they're not, they're all individuals. That's what's happening elsewhere in the world. The mass world is dying because of technology. And a new world is emerging where the individual has more power. And I'm wondering if images ... Did that image in that 1926 film, did that influence in any way events afterwards? The view of the masses? Did it? Because the masses started to be murdered.

Or did it anticipate it as a feeling? It could be either way ...

DH: Yeah, yeah, yeah, but the mass world had only just begun about then. [...] Film right now – Hollywood – is trying what they call 3D, but I would point out that it isn't really 3D because with real 3D you choose where to look. But a film director is always going to tell you where to look. That's how you make the story with one camera, meaning it is edited, cut. But if you have eighteen cameras you don't need to tell it like that because in a sense the viewer begins to decide where to look.

And like you do with the paintings.

DH: It means the viewer has more choices and it seems to me that is reflecting what is happening now. Do you think for instance that Hitler and Stalin saw that movie?

Lang's film? That's an interesting question.

DH: You know, I pointed out if you watched *Metropolis* on an iPad, a young person might think it was a grainy black-and-white film made in starving Weimar Germany. Well, no, it wasn't. It was really a million-dollar movie and it was made in a very rich country. Compared to other places in the world, it was very, very rich at the time. And we are led to believe otherwise. People were attracted to film. You know the story about Michael Curtiz, who was the Hungarian who directed *Casablanca*. He was one of the inventors of Hollywood. And there is a story about when he saw the first film ever, which was in a café in Budapest, a bohemian café in about 1900, and somebody set up the projector and winded it up. But he noticed one thing, it wasn't the story of the film, he noticed that everybody watched it. He said not everybody goes to the opera, not everybody goes to the theatre but they *will* go to the cinema. And he was right, wasn't he? When cinema first appeared it was thrilling for people; seeing a moving picture was thrilling.

Well let's face it, 1926, neither were in power quite, but I would have suspected that many people saw it, it was a million-dollar movie in 1926, when you think it cost a great deal to make. Floods, fire, storms, and so on.

One of the things which I felt was also fascinating, in 2007 you did this very, very big painting for the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy. Obviously these huge spaces lead to bigger formats and to a bigger immersion.

DH: You know for instance Matisse's great remark about colour was that two kilos of blue are a lot bluer than one kilo of blue. It's very good and profound actually. Meaning that colour has an effect, the bigger the scale. And that's why people are affected by the colour; it's the scale of it. It's this crowd scene that's got me; it's this very, very powerful image in Fritz Lang.

So you go back and back to it.

DH: The way they're all seen as totally passive. Of course we'd had industrialization and so there are masses, everywhere, in Europe. But the image is unbelievably strong and powerful and sticks in your head. I'd

recommend this book called *Bloodlands* by Timothy Snyder. It's a horror story, it's horrifying, when they starved the peasants in the Ukraine, I mean there were three and a half million. And in the book it's included in a sense with the Holocaust. Fourteen and a half million people were murdered. These were not just victims of war; they were deliberately murdered by two governments, one in Berlin and one in Moscow.

It was genocide.

DH: Yes, on a massive scale. But I'm pointing out that you can only have mass killing in the age of the mass media, and the mass media that you can control. It meant that they could control all information. Which you cannot now, simply because of technology. The technology made that, but now it's making something different. What's fascinating is that that is what is altering today because everything that is the mass media is actually crumbling. That's why advertisers are researching how to reach the masses. It was perfectly easy for fifty years. Just look at television. But that doesn't work now. A massive audience on television is now ten million. In the 1950s a massive audience on television was thirty-five million. It's shrunk and it will shrink more. Lucille Ball – you know *I Love Lucy* – her audience at times was thirty million, because of course there wasn't anything much else. But that will never happen again, we won't get that again.

So the question for you is to make a film which will be about that new condition.

DH: *Exactement*. Because the individual now has more power. That is why I watch Mr Murdoch on television because I knew his power was going to diminish because of the technology and he knew it too. He's not a fool. He knows it. He tried to buy MySpace to see if he could control it but you can't control things that way any more. Facebook might have five hundred million people on it but they are not all seeing the same thing. That's the point. If you think about it the period of mass media was also the period of stars. It needed stars. Now the new media doesn't, your friends are the stars. If you notice that's what's happening, stars aren't what they were. We are

living in a world of cheap celebrity. It's the last fling of the mass media trying to keep people interested in others that they can control.

It's disappearing. Are you on Facebook?

DH: No, but I am on Twitter. I don't tweet, but I do observe it. For instance the day after my show opened here, I went to Baden-Baden because I was tired. But in Baden-Baden I followed the critics on Twitter. I then realized that Twitter was the totally new space; that the newspaper wasn't really telling you what it really was, they were telling you that you could tweet just a little message that can't be that many letters. But it isn't just that because people can post something on it. Therefore I read reviews, but I also read comments on the reviews. The old schoolmaster critic is over, because people can write back now saying, 'Well I don't think that at all.' Then I realized this whole new space had opened up. I can see that the press are very, very frightened now. The *Guardian* for instance, it's losing a great deal of money, every week it loses three million pounds. How long can it go on? They have a website; it's not bad, quite well designed. But it is still free, they're not making any money on it. And they daren't charge yet because if they did the audience might disappear. You know, in 1810 *The Times* of London cost one shilling, which was quite a lot of money at the time. But why? Because for a hundred years or more its main news was called the 'Shipping News', which told you what ships were coming in and going out and what their cargoes were. It was for merchants and tradesmen who needed this information. It was specialized information for people who could read it. It wasn't for everybody: if you weren't a merchant, you wouldn't be too interested. And in a way newspapers have slowly become ... here's another thing, if they think they can use the iPad they'll use it, but I am noticing something else. In a way, on the iPad or the computer, the individual becomes an editor, you start choosing. Just as a parallel here is a story that is true. In 1920 some American futurologist predicted that by 1960 you would need so many telephone operators that there would be hardly any other jobs left. Now his calculations turned out to be correct. By 1960 everybody was a telephone operator, they dialled themselves, they had

become the operator, so you had millions of operators. He was correct. But he didn't foresee one little thing that made it easier. I think we are now seeing something a bit similar. The old newspaper thinks that you will just do that, but will you? How long do I want to spend in a morning on trying to find out what is going on in the world? I am a newspaper reader and I have been a newspaper reader for sixty years; I've been reading the *Guardian*. But today do I really want to read loads of information, like the sports section I never open? If it didn't exist I wouldn't notice. OK, sport is a now, meaning that you want an account of what happened right away. I've pointed out that in the future of television there will only be two things: sports or disasters because they are both 'now', they have to be 'now'. No one wants to see last week's football game when you know the result. It has to be now. But sport is easier to depict than disasters; sport is organized so that it is easy to depict. In fact, I remember when someone blew up the Federal Building in Kansas City, what ten, fifteen years ago, I put on the television and watched it and I remember one thing: the television crews are outside and people are rushing in, and they tried to ask somebody what's it like and he said, 'It's not like television in there, it's horrible.' Television glamorizes, the camera glamorizes, and he's saying that it's not glamorous in there, dead bodies coming out. And television couldn't show you that. It's good for sport but not that good for this. But I knew that everybody would be interested because it was a big event and you're thinking, 'OK, so what can I know about it?' I'll tell you what else I am thinking: what we call the art world – of which I am a part, I earn a living in it – it has given up on certain things. One of them was depiction, how do you depict the visible world? People think that one camera can show you reality. But it can't, really. Once you have abandoned depiction in a way, or abandoned image, you're abandoning what is the most powerful thing. Images are the most powerful thing. Damien Hirst made some powerful images, although not many because they repeat. This is what I am exploring right now.

So you think that this crowd idea might produce an image for this new condition?

DH: What I am going to do is get forty people. We've got this shape but if you have different events going on; somebody fighting somebody ... I'll think of things to do. You the viewer won't be able to see them all at the same time because this picture is eighteen different times anyway. One picture is one time. It's all the same time in every corner of the picture.

So it is parallel realities?

DH: Well it is closer, first of all to how we see, but also now closer to what we are becoming in a way. As I say, the Arab Spring is simply about this, it's about new technology giving people more power, that's all it is. And it will happen here, it will happen everywhere. Governments will have a harder time governing because you've got new forms of power for the individual. And no one knows what's going to happen; I think a lot of people are very frightened by it.

All authorities are being challenged. With the internet everyone can be a museum curator ...

DH: Which I can see would be dangerous. I mean we need authority in some form. But it is happening whether we like it or not. The whole thing is that, for the individual, once you move to this technology, it's simply having more power. But I think when it comes to news, there are ways to find out. If some event is happening, there are few ways, one of them is Twitter, oh yeah.

So you really follow Twitter?

DH: Well I don't spend that much time on it, but I am aware of it. I was more fascinated by it than I thought. I was aware that the newspapers would be frightened of it because it is their territory and they're not ... It's a fascinating thing, this.

So you think media is crumbling slowly but then it might suddenly speed up?

DH: I think so. I just read in *Private Eye* – you have to get this kind of information from *Private Eye* – that the *Guardian* has organized a kind of weekend to meet the writers with the readers. They asked me to go along, but I said I'm too deaf, I can't really participate like that very easily. Anyway they organized it and had all these speakers and all that and *Private Eye* pointed out that when they added up all funds they lost two hundred thousand pounds. How long can you go on? They're fighting a losing battle. But I'm pointing out that I don't think it will work like that on here [taps iPad], you become an editor on here. Depending on what kind of story you are looking for, I know where to go and look.

I'm an observer of Twitter; it's an unbelievably fascinating space.

Google Alert is good.

DH: There are all kinds of things. These are new spaces and this is why the newspapers know that they are doomed. The *Evening Standard* is now given away for free but they have to pay London Transport quite a lot of money to clear up afterwards. Well, there's a metaphor if ever I saw one of the old dying media because in the end you'll be reading it on an iPad which you don't have to clean up. And probably the next form of screen will be, well they're working on folding screens, so if you have a screen that big you'll be able to fold it out that much and it can be very thin. So that's the future, you can see that because of the way they distribute it. I could never get the *Herald Tribune*, they used to say we'll deliver anywhere in Europe, it's not true because I would have been the only subscriber in Bridlington. Bridlington being isolated they would have had to have schlepped it over from York. They wouldn't do it. But I can now subscribe to *The New York Times*, the whole thing. It's the only one I subscribe to on this. There is far too much in these fucking newspapers. All kinds of things, but I never read the sports pages, there are loads of pages I don't read. I do now, more and more, read the financial pages because I've realized that they can be truer than the other pages. I pointed out why to somebody, I said you see on the front page you might have, it might say, 'Too Much Pornography in Manchester, Says Chief Constable'. But the financial pages

might say, 'Bigger Demand for Pornography in Manchester'. I read the same things, but from a different point of view you have a different reaction. So I am aware that this is where it's going. There's no newspaper industry any more.

You know I've got hundreds of letters addressed 'David Hockney, Bridlington' and they get delivered. They all come, loads of them. Very nice, a lot of them.

It's very interesting, your idea about Lang and Germany and that this [film] will premiere over there.

DH: Well I am assuming that the images of the masses in that film are very powerful, when they are all underground marching into an elevator, and I am pointing out that the mass killing started seven years after that. Did Hitler and Stalin see that film? Probably. They say that there were more people in Eisenstein's film than took part in the Revolution. I mean how many people were killed, murdered. It's horrifying. It's why I argue when a doctor said to me a hundred million were killed by tobacco in the twentieth century, I said you can't say that. A hundred million people were killed for political reasons in the twentieth century and their deaths were horrible. Your deaths were people dying in their bed. You can't say they were 'killed' like that. You can't use that word in the same way, it's too overloaded. Especially in the twentieth century.

It's been so wonderful to meet you again. Maybe we could meet up again when you come to London.

DH: I prefer to be in Bridlington. My only health problem is my hearing. I don't like noise and prefer solitude. Listening is quite hard work for me. I prefer to have a quiet life.

Portraits of Los Angeles

When did you arrive in Los Angeles?

DH: I came back on June 15 of last year and I've been here ever since. I'm staying for a while. I started working on a series of portraits towards the end of July. I've now done twenty-six of them, I think.

How do you paint them?

DH: The subjects come to the house and sit here for three days while I paint them. It takes me from fifteen to eighteen hours to complete each portrait. I'm getting a strong sense of individuality from each of the participants, which is one of the main reasons I'm doing them. They'll all be very different, highly individual, in the same way that we are. We're all different, aren't we? Pass me that cigarette, thank you.

Do you use preliminary studies for the portraits? Or do you paint the subjects directly?

DH: I sketch them first with charcoal, which generally takes forty minutes. And once I've got it, I start painting the heads, which usually take me three hours.

How extraordinary: a whole new portrait gallery.

DH: We did show nine of them at the de Young Museum in San Francisco – including the portrait of [art dealer] Larry Gagosian – but that was it. I've painted twenty-two more since then, so I've probably done about thirty altogether. It's a great project. I'm very excited about it.

They're incredibly powerful portraits. Are the sitters all born-and-bred Angelenos?

DH: Pretty much. [Art critic] Martin Gayford is one of the few exceptions, along with my brother, who flew in from Australia for the show in San Francisco. I painted him while he was here. Oh, I don't like San Francisco, it's such a bore. *Such* a bore! No smoking! I am a happy smoker, for a start. That boy in the T-shirt, meanwhile, lives in Israel. I told him that if he came to LA I'd paint him – so he came. 'Just do it,' he said.

How did you choose the chair that's featured in the portraits?

DH: Well, I just chose it. I started out by playing around with the furniture, which is why there are two separate portraits of Gregory [Evans, Hockney's curator and manager of business and exhibitions] sitting in two different chairs. It wasn't until later that I realized that it was probably best if I painted all the subjects in the same space and the same chair.

How did this year's exhibition at the de Young Museum in San Francisco differ from your 2012 show at the Royal Academy of Arts in London?

DH: Only ten per cent of the works on display at the de Young were shown at the RCA. The scope and range of the San Francisco exhibition was much broader.

Hence its title, 'A Bigger Exhibition'.

DH: They told me it couldn't be called 'A Bigger Picture' [the title of Hockney's exhibition at the RCA, 2012], so I said, 'Well, why don't we just call it "A Bigger Exhibition"?'. And that's exactly what it turned out to be.

Did you ask the de Young to change its colour scheme for the show?

DH: Yes, I did. I can't stand white walls and white cubes. Gregory chose the colour for the walls. Gregory did it! [*Showing the film of the de Young exhibition*] I mean, look at that green on that red! The exhibition attracted two hundred and forty thousand visitors in twelve weeks. We filmed it with three high-definition cameras, which is why you're getting a much better colour. Yeah, it was a good show. Even *The New York Times* had to admit that they'd ignored my work for too long.

Is the landscape with the trees in your studio something you painted here?

DH: Yes, I made it when I first got back to LA. I was trying out acrylic paint based on some drawings I'd made in the garden. It was an experiment, nothing more, before I got started on the portraits. I did this one because J-P

[Jean-Pierre Goncalves de Lima, Hockney's studio assistant] and I both felt like this. It's based on Van Gogh's *Eternity*. Have you seen this [Joe Sacco's illustrated panorama, *The Great War: July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme*]? This is fantastic. It's done like a Chinese scroll, with no vanishing points. It's amazing. And it goes on and on and on ... Latrines ... Somebody having a pee ... It's all in there and it's so much better than film or photography.

So Vincent Van Gogh's Old Man in Sorrow (On the Threshold of Eternity) was the starting point for your new series of portraits?

DH: Yeah. I knew of the painting, so I just asked J-P to pull it off the internet and print it.

Are you concurrently pursuing your digital work with the iPhone and iPad?

DH: I haven't been doing so much digital stuff lately because I'm focusing on the portraits and drawing on canvas. I'm painting people, and I do it without cameras, with just my two eyes to look at them. I think that's how I get the volumes. When you place the portrait of Merle [Glick, Hockney's dentist] next to that of John Baldessari, you can tell that John's much taller, can't you? And indeed, if he stood up he would be a lot bigger than Merle. It's amazing: all you have to do is sit somebody down and they will always sit slightly differently. They all do, everybody does.

Do you converse with your sitters while you're painting them?

DH: I can't talk when I'm working. Once I've started, I remain silent. But I'm more than happy to chat while they're making themselves comfortable. I then draw as quickly as possible to catch certain affects – like a slouch, or the boy saying, 'Just do it.' They're drawn very, very quickly. And then painted. Painting is a much slower process. I catch the person. I do catch them.

How do you choose the background colours?

DH: I just alter them slightly from one portrait to the next.

How many more are you hoping to paint?

DH: I might do a thousand, I really don't know yet. I'm saying I'll do fifty, but I'll keep on going until I grow tired of it. That said, I don't think I ever will be: you never tire of looking at people, do you? You can look at them for quite a while. You play around with them. Yeah, I think this studio is looking better than it has done in years.

Why have you never published a book of your collected writings?

DH: Well, yes, I have written things ... I don't know. Taschen is planning a big book, a very big book, a great big enormous book. They've asked me to sign twenty thousand of them, which might be a problem.

That's crazy.

DH: [*Pointing to one of the portraits*] It's very good, that colour on the shirt. I was just painting it this morning, the one with the green shirt. I started it yesterday and I was working on it from 9.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. Another four hours and it should be done.

Have any aspects of the Los Angeles landscape caught your eye recently?

DH: We ventured up the mountains last year to shoot the video for 'Wagner Drive', in which we drove around playing Wagner and Schumann just to prove that it was possible. We placed a small camera on the back of the car, and two small cameras on the front, and then wired them up to get a much wider picture and a more interesting horizon. Let me see whether I can find it for you ... Argh. I haven't got it here. Have you seen *The Jugglers*?

Yes, I saw them in London.

DH: [*Showing an extract from Randall Wright's BBC documentary, David Hockney: Secret Knowledge, 2003*] This was in Florence. I went there in 2000 to make a film about Brunelleschi's working methods and how he

made his famous perspective picture of the baptistery. In this scene, we're positioning a five-inch-diameter concave mirror in the precise position where we know Brunelleschi painted his picture – three *braccia*, or approximately two metres, inside the doorway of the Florence Cathedral, looking out on to the baptistery. Our aim was to prove that Brunelleschi used a projected image, a camera, to invent linear perspective.

Were the landscapes you exhibited at the de Young drawn in Yorkshire or Los Angeles?

DH: They were drawn in England, from January until May last year. Each one begins in the winter, then each one is the same view but it's different. That's the same view now but a little further on with the trees. And another a bit further on ... And another, and there's a final one with the sun out and the shadows.

Architects often tell me how inspired they are by your work. How do you explain that your oeuvre is such a benchmark to them?

DH: The Mexican architect Luis Barragán always used to say that he'd source his colours from my paintings. I suppose it's the space – or rather the illusion of space in my paintings – that does it.

How long have you had this house for?

DH: I've had it for thirty-two years. The pool is warm – you can go swimming if you like. John [Fitzherbert, Hockney's former partner] and I landscaped the garden years ago. We planted the giant cactus together. We're not overlooked by anybody here. Gregory lives next door, but nobody overlooks this.

Did you choose the colours?

DH: Yeah, yeah. I painted the house this colour in 1983, and when I said I wanted it to be blue, they all said, 'Oh, no, terrible!' but then they loved it when it was finished. And I said, 'Yes, well, the green of nature is good with red and blue.'

The 'post-photographic' era

Let's start by talking about these new paintings, which are sitting here in your studio.

DH: Well, some of them are for an exhibition in Germany ['Just Nature' at the Kunsthalle Würth] but the studio here contains a lot of paintings from the past three years, a period of my life which has been spent mostly here in East Yorkshire. I started painting landscapes because I wanted to depict the three-dimensional world. East Yorkshire is the perfect place to do that because I know the area; I worked on farms here when I was a teenager at school. Most people leave us alone up here and I can get on with actually looking at things: it's got a gentle rolling landscape, chalk hills, and it's very quiet. Being an agricultural area, the surface of the earth changes colour a lot, unlike a pastoral place. And because we're on the east coast, we get terrific shadows: a lot of these drawings are done very early in the morning or in the evening, when the sun is quite low.

So you've been drawing already this morning?

DH: No, not this morning because it was a bit cloudy, but we're often out drawing at six in the morning to get the light. It's such a nice thing to do: you know, we are three-dimensional creatures and we live in a three-dimensional world, unlike cyberspace, which is not three-dimensional. I've tended to think that the camera can't deal with landscape very well because a camera doesn't really see space – it sees surfaces. Human beings see space; and landscapes such as the Grand Canyon have always been a spatial thrill to me.

Am I right in saying that the idea of painting Yorkshire came right after you completed the Grand Canyon paintings in the late 90s? Both being huge empty spaces, I was wondering if there is a link?

DH: There is, but I think it's all part of a much bigger link in my work. It came to me when I was invited to the launch of Adobe Photoshop in Silicon Valley in about 1989. During the demonstration I could see that it was

drawing, really drawing, and that in front of my eyes this was signalling the end of chemical photography – although it's only recently that Kodak have stopped making the fixative that was actually the formula of Sir John Herschel in 1839.

In the same way that Polaroid has stopped. I was with a friend the other day and we couldn't find a film for his camera anywhere. It's interesting because you anticipated this shift very early on – in an almost manifesto-like way – you said that we're in a 'post-photographic' era.

DH: I think that too many claims have been made for photography: people claim that it records what the world looks like, that it tells you the truth, and so on. I've always defended drawing, however: I've pointed out to the people who were trying to get rid of drawing that if they have their way, all we'll be left with is photographs ... and they're not good enough, or realistic enough. I've also pointed out that nobody has made any genuine criticism of photography, whatsoever. These days, people want to avoid the debate simply because there's a huge commercial interest in photographic images: CNN, for instance, have every interest in telling you that they're showing you the real world; they certainly don't want David Hockney telling you it's just bad art and that photography isn't actually presenting any realities. This is now a big problem. Did you know, for instance, about my argument with the British National Health Service? They issued a series of anti-smoking advertisements, one of which featured a boy with a fishing hook cut through his cheek into his mouth, and it said, 'Don't Get Hooked'. I pointed out that, according to the 1985 Obscene Publications Act, you cannot depict cruelty to another human being – *[laughing]* well, there goes the crucifixion – and this was a picture of deliberate cruelty to another human being. So they had to withdraw the photograph ...

So you succeeded in ...

DH: No, I didn't succeed in anything. People objected to the photograph because it frightened children.

It was public opinion that stopped it ...

DH: Yes, they withdrew it. But I then asked the question, 'Why wasn't anybody prosecuted for this?' The reason why is because no one believed that it had happened – because, quite simply, it's a Photoshop image. Now, if it had actually happened, the photographer would have been prosecuted for committing grievous bodily harm and then depicting it. But they weren't, so that tells us it didn't happen. It tells us there's no truth in it.

And it tells us a lot about Photoshop.

DH: Yes it does. I pointed out that Photoshop is a kind of Stalinist collage. It's collage without the glue showing. Well, I'm defining Stalinist collage as collage without the glue showing. Like the famous removal of Trotsky and so on, which was based on the public assuming that all photographs depict reality. Of course, in the 1930s you still needed a laboratory to alter photographs, but today anybody can do it at home on a computer. So the consequences, the veracity, have been lost. Or was it even there from the beginning? If you see a photograph of me shaking hands with George Bush, it doesn't necessarily mean I've ever met George Bush.

Let's talk about these incredible new digital photography sequences of yours; they use digital photography in a very different way than I have ever seen it used before.

DH: When my assistant J-P and I went out together to work on the watercolours, he started to take digital photographs of me doing the work. Because he's my assistant I didn't mind him doing it, meaning that I could ultimately control the photographs. It then dawned on me that, because of the digits, you didn't have to change the roll every thirty-six; you didn't have to process everything and so there was a new area where you could create sequential photography. J-P could take maybe eight hundred photographs while I was doing a drawing. In the past you couldn't do that, or it would have been very difficult; now it's possible and you realize that this is a new area and what's interesting about it is that you can tell a story

using the sequence. And what's a more interesting event than a picture being made by hand? This is what we have recorded.

You've always made photographs and I've been thinking about the very long trajectory that photography has had in your work. More specifically, how your attitude to the medium has changed over the years.

DH: Well, I'm interested in images for a start. So if you're interested in images you're interested in photographs. I became a photographer, but I always used to say that I had a hot-and-cold relationship with photography, meaning that there was both a fascination with it but also an aspect which meant it wasn't a very true way of looking at the world. The problem of perspective then becomes interesting because it looks as though Western perspective has been confirmed by photography. That's what history says at the moment. But I suggest that it's not confirmed by the photograph, it's actually a law of optics. Perspective must have come from the optical projection of nature. This was one of the arguments that I left out in the first edition of my book *Secret Knowledge* [2001]. I discovered that when I was reading about the birth of Western perspective, there was this story of Brunelleschi making a panel of the baptistery in Florence as seen from the cathedral – it was supposedly the first 'perspective' picture. I was fascinated by this story. Just as my book had gone to press – about eight years ago – it dawned on me what I thought Brunelleschi had done. With this in mind, we planned a trip to Florence to get them to open the doors of the baptistery to try out what I had in mind.

What did you have to plan?

DH: By looking on the maps of Florence, I'd realized that at seven thirty in the morning the sun would be right behind the baptistery, thus lighting it. My assistant, David Graves, had got there first and he was initially a bit worried because he said to me, 'Do you realize how close the baptistery is to the cathedral, do you think this will really work?' I told him I thought it would, because I'd noticed that cameras push things away and I thought

that's what would happen here. It was an experiment: we didn't know if it would work, but it did! We got them to open the doors and we stood where Brunelleschi had stood; we put a panel up, the same size as the one Brunelleschi had used, and we started filming it. Then, with a five-inch-diameter concave mirror, we projected the baptistery on to the panel. It was upside down, but because the building is hexagonal you got the angles and you could then just draw them in. Now, I questioned whether we were the first to do this. I'm convinced we were the second because Brunelleschi must have known this. Florence was the most advanced city in the world at the time and art history claims that Brunelleschi did not know this. Highly unlikely! I ended up writing thirty new pages about the experience in the second edition of *Secret Knowledge*.

You're basically correcting art history, something that's clearly going to provoke reactions.

DH: Well, I think that art history has ignored an aspect of art that today has become deeply significant. I've realized that the optical projection of nature, which is basically what a photograph is, is much, much older than the chemical invention. Eighteen thirty-nine is merely the chemical invention, the fixing of the image. The image had been seen long, long before that. And if you make them yourself you realize that they look like paintings. People had to have seen these, and then you realize that nobody has ever talked about this. The power of the Church – which was enormous at one time, and had huge social control – was when it had the mirrors and lenses to make pictures. Historically you can see its power begins to decline when cameras are widely manufactured after 1839. And slowly its power declines and the continuum follows the mirror and lenses, which then get into the hands of what we now call the media, who've had that control ever since. But it's just about to break up again in a totally new way, of which, frankly, we don't know what the implications are going to be ... What is happening is that even more cameras are being manufactured; they're now in every telephone, so not only can I take a picture, I can now deliver it to

many people. In the past, the picture was delivered by a small group, the media, to the masses, but that group has now spread to everybody.

That leads to something you described in a recent interview about how television programmes are all atomized.

DH: Yes, we're moving out of that period and we're now in a new one. What is the new one like? Well, I'm beginning to see that first of all it's heavily indebted to the optical projection of the world, meaning the photograph. YouTube is images sent out by anybody, and I notice that Mr Murdoch is interested in them because he obviously sees that the mass media is coming to an end. At least that's the evidence as I watch it.

When I was a student I read for the first time about you using the fax machine and it was a total revelation for me at the time because I started thinking how the fax could be an artistic medium ... and at the same time you were at the very beginning of Photoshop. The way you use these different mediums is fascinating ...

DH: Pass me that catalogue. I said in it that 'commercial printing is an artist's medium'. At the end of the exhibition the pages of the catalogue were framed on the wall, and they're not reproductions.

That means everyone who buys the catalogue has the work at home ...

DH: ... and they're not reproductions, in the sense that they were all drawn with four layers: the cyan, the yellow, the magenta and the black. And I said, 'Just print it.' So they are not reproductions, they only exist in this form. We also did it for newspapers.

Yes, I read that you did something for the Bradford Telegraph ...

DH: ... and I did something for the *Herald Examiner* in Los Angeles in the 80s. I'd always been interested in printing and reproduction. Simply because I knew reproduction had allowed me to see lots of paintings, in

books. Actually, the first book I did was in 1975, in which there are still lots of black-and-white pictures. I remember the publisher asking me, 'Do you want the book to be with more colour and with a price of twenty pounds or less colour and only ten pounds?' I went for the ten-pound version because more people would buy it. I realized that printing was the way that people could see a lot of work. It's a great example of how art can travel. And now reproduction has changed: there are new kinds of cameras, new kinds of digital processes.

Technology doesn't necessarily have a rapport with quality.

DH: Look, for instance, at the effects of technology: the moment the war in Iraq began, they initially thought they would be able to control images just as they had done with the First World War. Well, within two weeks they realized that technology had made control impossible because everyone's got a telephone with a camera on it. And then the *Los Angeles Times* fired a photographer for putting two photographs together to make a stronger image. I realized then that they were fighting a losing battle. I mean, they think we're still in an age where, 'I had a camera, I stood there and it looked like this in front of me.' That age, even if it once existed, is now gone. The trouble is, you see, Susan Sontag, for instance, in her latest book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* ...

... which is about war photography.

DH: First of all, she refers to the invention of the camera in 1839, which is intellectually lazy, because the camera was not invented in 1839 ... that's her problem not realizing that. But she also points out that when Matthew Brady was photographing the American Civil War, he would pull a body over here, move a thing there, to literally compose his pictures. But that's what they always did with cameras. Susan Sontag is imposing a later view of photography: you know, snap, snap, snap, take a quick one ... but you couldn't even do that in 1861. People who have written about photography have never connected it with pre-photography pictures. In fact, the Museum of Modern Art actually did an exhibition in 1981 entitled 'Before

Photography'. I remember the exhibition: it had paintings by people like Constable and the Danish 'Golden Age' painters, and so on, and it led you to believe that these painters were getting close to reality ... and then photography came along and showed us reality. It never mentioned that the painters themselves were using cameras.

It was the same with the Courbet retrospective in Paris. It was obvious that Courbet knew about photography.

DH: Absolutely. I was shocked when a few artists saw what I was writing and said, 'Oh you're saying the Old Masters cheated!' I was appalled by that. I just thought, 'You ignorant people.' To use optics meant that they were extremely clever.

As you say so beautifully in Secret Knowledge, it allowed them to make a portrait much faster and that it was more direct ...

DH: Yes. With Frans Hals, if you really look at them, you can actually begin to see his use of optics, but you've got to be very clever to do so. As you still do today. Malcolm Morley [English artist] told me that he bought a camera lucida and he couldn't use it, he couldn't even see through it. I told him that you have to train yourself, that it takes a while ...

You did all these experiments, didn't you?

DH: Yes I did. That's why I'm going to Florence actually. There's a seminar on Caravaggio and they've invited me. What we're going to do is set up a little show, just as Della Porta must have done, meaning that it will be like a cinema. We're just trying to demonstrate that it could have been done six hundred years before.

So these are almost like scientific demonstrations as done by an artist ... Eight years ago we made a hell of a lot of optical experiments. We filmed some, one in particular where we showed how Caravaggio painted *The Supper at Emmaus*.

How can one see these films? Are they available to the public?

DH: No they're not. I might have some here. I have them in London. So Caravaggio used a collage technique, and the more you get into it the more it becomes apparent, simply by the scale of things. The thing is, I became anti-optical ... it makes you not want to look through cameras.

Tell me a bit more about the optical research you did.

DH: I did a lot of comparison displays. You see, I have quite an art library in Los Angeles. And I have a colour-photocopying machine in the studio, so I didn't have to rip up the books. We could do reproductions of many works throughout the years and pin them all on the wall. By making a wall of images, we began to see what happened: before 1420 there's hardly a shadow in anything, afterwards there's suddenly a lot of shadows. There are no shadows in Chinese, Japanese, Indian or Persian painting, which is all highly sophisticated. So where do the shadows suddenly come in something like Caravaggio? Caravaggio invented Hollywood lighting: it comes from stage left, stage right or above. And I pointed out that with Caravaggio the light comes from another source.

So you could say that Hollywood started with Caravaggio?

DH: Kind of, yes! One of my neighbours, Grey Gowrie, when I asked him what he thought of the Caravaggio exhibition, he said to you me, 'You know, there's a side to it that's too Hollywood', and I said, 'You'd be surprised by the connection!'

Fascinatingly, you also say that collage started with people like Caravaggio. I mean, the twentieth century has clearly been the collage century from Dada onwards ...

DH: Certainly Caravaggio's technique leads me to believe that. [*Studying a Caravaggio image*] Here we are, look, this basket of fruit, it looks fine, but that basket is that wide, and the scale is odd and you realize that the scene from head on ... Caravaggio painted in dark rooms and he put holes in the ceiling and you realize what the hole is doing, it's lighting the figures and things. So we demonstrated that he didn't need to set up people at a table at

all, everyone sits in the same place exactly. There are no known drawings made by Caravaggio or Vermeer or Frans Hals. So how did he construct a picture like this without any drawings? Well, we demonstrated how, it was genius, unbelievably clever, using fantastic techniques that would be of interest to anybody today using Photoshop.

So we could even say that Photoshop started with Caravaggio ...

DH: [*Laughs*] There's not that much new, visually.

Another thing I wanted to ask you about is that there is voluntary and involuntary distortion ...

DH: [*Referring back to the Caravaggio image*] You can see in these paintings that the head is too big or that hand is too big or the distance between the head and shoulder is too far, and that's when you realize that it's all collage. It's not something you notice straight away, but once you do, you can't stop seeing it. And you realize that this is a collage technique; you can see how he's doing it.

With Caravaggio and Vermeer there is no drawing, but with Ingres he also used optical devices but there was also drawing ...

DH: Well, I'm sure that Ingres used the camera lucida. Remember, Ingres was a superb draughtsman and, like I said earlier, you've got to be to use it. It doesn't do the work for you. When there was the Ingres show in London, they had drawings of the English aristocrats that were visiting Rome and he did not know them. I was amazed that he had only met them once and he'd get them to come for lunch and he'd observe them. Then the next day the drawing was done, quite quickly. But my own method showed me in the end what he did: you use it very, very quickly to make points, in a way fast-forward measuring.

You've done a lot of portraits of people in your entourage and friends and wider family, but you were never like Warhol, who did commissions of the rich and famous. Why was this was the case? Was it a conscious decision?

DH: Yes, it was a decision. I deliberately didn't want to do any commissioned portraits, because it's not a problem I want to spend time on. Meaning, if you don't know someone very well, how do you know if you've got a likeness? Andy's portraits were done as a means of keeping his magazine [*Interview*] going; it didn't make any money, so he basically maintained it by painting German industrialists' wives. Around the same time he was doing those, he did a portrait of me ...

What was your relationship with Warhol like? Friendly?

DH: Yes, we got on. I first met him in 1963. When he did the portrait, I did a drawing of him. My friend Henry Geldzahler [curator at Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York] didn't like the portrait Andy had done, so he said to him, 'Well, you've left something out, Andy', and Andy was like, 'No, what?' And Henry replied, 'You've left the art out!' And Andy just said, 'Oh well, I'll do another', which Henry liked.

There are quite a lot of references to [American poet] Wallace Stevens in your work ... so I was wondering about his work and its links to nature and in turn the links to your work ...

DH: I illustrated a poem of his called 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' about thirty years ago. It's a terrific poem. Wallace Stevens is fascinating. Do you know he used to buy paintings in Paris through an agent without looking at them? Not by very good artists, but it was an odd way to get pictures, to trust someone like that.

You have always had a strong link to poetry.

DH: I've done a lot of paintings over the years that were inspired by poetry. I haven't for quite a while, but I still read poetry. There are certain things that I am not that acquainted with – one of them being lyrics of pop songs – so a lot of contemporary poetry I have some difficulty with because I don't know all the allusions. Pop music, after a certain date, I know nothing about, nor care much about.

*But certainly in the past, poetry played a big role in your work,
notably with your piece We Two Boys Together Clinging [1961],
which was named after the Walt Whitman poem ...*

DH: Yes, Walt Whitman. I always loved the poem 'I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing'. It's a bit like the Wallace Stevens line 'I placed a jar in Tennessee ...' I've always known that the poet knows more ...

Why do you say that?

DH: Very early on I came across a poem called 'Delight in Disorder' and I thought, 'I love that idea.' It's by Robert Herrick, the last lines are: 'A careless shoe-string, in whose tie / I see a wild civility: / Do more bewitch me, than when art / Is too precise in every part.' I read that when I was about ten years old and I thought, 'Poets know more ...' Delight in disorder is something I think I have. It means you have a higher sense of order, actually. I'm a bit of a slob, I'm not that tidy, and I used to say it's because I have a higher sense of order and I can see order where others can't. And that was my excuse for being a slob.

*And what about your link to Walt Whitman? I'm thinking
specifically about your incredible 1961 print Myself and My
Heroes, which features yourself, Walt Whitman and Mahatma
Gandhi ...*

DH: I admired Whitman when I was younger, but I also saw that he had serious flaws. He was certainly an interesting man but he was not quite the saint I thought at one time. He didn't always take into account others' fragility. When I first went to America I thought every schoolboy would be able to quote Walt Whitman, but most had never heard of him. I should have known! It was very American writing, it felt free, it seemed to me to be very fresh; I read the whole of *Leaves of Grass*, and it's a vast thing. And then you realize the Americans have always been a little bit dubious because of their gayness; 'for the dear love of comrades', as Walt Whitman would say. He was one of the first great American literary figures who were

taken seriously in England. They realized how good it was. It's full of images, his poetry.

I always thought there should be a book of your writings, almost like a manifesto.

DH: Well, I defend myself, that's all I do.

Don't you write every day?

DH: No, I write when I get annoyed! Like when I get fed up with the anti-smoking campaigns. I think that writing 'Smoking Kills' on a packet of cigarettes is just part of the 'uglification' of Europe. You know what? Life's a killer! So what? We don't need to plaster it on everything, everywhere. I would certainly protest against the 'demonization' of smoking, which I think has been terrible. I've smoked for fifty-two years and, frankly, I'm fine. And I don't intend to stop. Actually, I think I'd find it incredibly difficult to work without it, to be honest. It keeps you calm; and I've pointed out what will happen in the future if you think you can get rid of it ... It's exactly what's happening in California right now: about forty per cent of the adverts on television in California are for prescription drugs. That is what will replace tobacco. The pharmaceutical industry will make the tobacco industry seem like Sunday-school teachers with what they'll do to us.

I remember seeing the death of Kennedy on television and the newsreaders were all smoking. It was a different world! I really loved New York when you could smoke anything, anywhere.

You should really bring together all your writings and publish a book.

DH: Anything I write these days tends to be about one of my three keen interests: photography, perspective or smoking!

On the subject of books, I wanted to ask you about the beautiful illustrations you did based on things like Grimm's Fairy Tales.

DH: That was in 1968. I remember arguing with Francis Bacon about the word 'illustration'. He'd use the word 'illustrator' as a put-down, as in 'How's your illustrating friend Mr Kitaj?' [R. B. Kitaj, American painter] I knew Bacon a little bit, not much, but you could have a great argument with him. I'd tell him that some of the best artists were illustrators: Rembrandt, Bible stories, Hogarth ...

And what did Bacon say?

DH: We'd argue just for the sake of it! I pointed out to him once that I knew a painting in California of some tulips in a vase that was as profound as anything he'd done. It was by Cézanne and it was in the Norton Simon Museum. I was just trying to tell him that it wasn't the subject matter that made images profound but the way they were treated. There was a period in the mid 70s when Bacon and I both lived in Paris and we'd see each other. Gregory used to go drinking with him ...

It's intriguing to think that, coming from the world of painting, how immersed you've been in all these other worlds: theatre, opera, illustration, art history ...

DH: As I said, I'm interested in images; I think that's the thread always ... I've always been interested in physics as well. Ultimately, the moment rules.

What do you mean by that?

DH: The moment rules: for instance, I was painting these pictures of the countryside, but the moment the hawthorn blossom went, I stopped. We only had it for four days: after that the rain came and took it all away, so the moment has to rule, especially if you're involved with nature because, after all, I'm living in Yorkshire, a place, unlike California, which changes throughout the year. Remember, for twenty-five years I didn't see springs and summers in California, it was always the same weather.

So being here is the reintroduction of the seasons into your life.

DH: Yes, that's one aspect. Let's go out for a drive so I can show you what I'm talking about.

Return to painting

DH: Living in this part of the world, you become very aware of the constant movement of nature. In the winter you're aware of how different the trees are, how they reach upwards towards the sky. In the summer, the branches are weighted down by gravity. I assume they must have planted the trees I want to show you about two hundred years ago; they must have been planned so that each tree has enough space around it. If you travel along the road at about ten miles an hour, each tree is revealed to you. I think somebody planned that a long time ago. It is a manicured landscape; it's affected by what human beings do to it. It's not wild, but on the other hand it is nature so there is constant variety. These trees here, if it had been very sunny this morning, I would have come out here, because the sun is over there. In the late afternoon, you do it at about 6 p.m. the other way, when the sun has gone to the west. And the longer you live here the more you realize which direction you should be looking, at what time of day and at what time of year. Notice how the trees are rather magnificent, stunning, as you move between them, each one has a different shape.

It's almost like a display, an exhibition of trees. Yes, you see the beauty of them, the scale of them. I often bring people down here and the visually minded ones get it very quickly. And somebody planned this two hundred years ago. That's what I like. You see each one is individual, there's no overlapping. And in the winter they are just as good. I'm still figuring out how to do a big painting of this. I'll turn the car round now, and if you go down it then you get another view, you see? At six in the morning, if the sun is low, it's magnificently lit. I get guests up at five in the morning to see it! But they always thank me for it. Just in this stretch of road alone, I've got subjects I can work with for a long time to come.

This could be your biggest painting ever.

DH: Yes, but we're moving, so how would you catch it? The Chinese would know how to do it, of course, because their landscapes were always walk-through landscapes.

How did you become familiar with Chinese painting?

DH: It was photography and perspective that got me interested. I read a book about Chinese painting by George Rowley and then I got very friendly with the curator of Chinese painting at the Met. He showed me a magnificent scroll that we did a film about, it's called *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China: or, Surface is Illusion but So is Depth*. The film was made twenty-two years ago but it's all about the same subjects I'm talking about now. In the world of Chinese scrolls it's become a cult film. I did it with Philip Haas, who'd done films on artists like Richard Long and Gilbert & George. It was supposed to be five minutes long for the people who commissioned it, but I pointed out that you couldn't possibly look at a scroll in just five minutes.

Have you made any other films?

DH: We did the film about *Secret Knowledge*. That's about one and a half hours long. The Chinese scroll film was done in the 80s. The Chinese, for instance, never use a vanishing point in perspective. In the sixteenth century it had been the most advanced culture in the world and by the nineteenth century it wasn't. I wondered what had happened and I was told that they had lost their intellectual curiosity and that military technology was superior elsewhere and that made me think. Military technology was improved with perspective because it set up triangulation and you could fire cannons more accurately. I thought that this connection is really interesting. It's interesting that now the European way of looking at the world has triumphed; I mean, the camera has triumphed. That wasn't the Chinese way of looking at the world ... They've just this field; you can see a long way now. I like that. I'm quite claustrophobic. That's probably why I lived in LA and not in New York. Probably why I'm not that fond of London; as I get older I'm more aware of it. I like big wide spaces.

And a lot of your paintings since the 1990s feature very wide spaces. The Grand Canyon, for example.

DH: I started by photographing the Grand Canyon because I always thought it was un-photographable. A lot of landscape is un-photographable, really; television makes it all look the same. There's no perspective of the Grand Canyon. I was always fascinated by it because it's the world's biggest hole and yet you can see the space. We don't know the edge of the space out here with the sky; it's too big for us to comprehend. Whereas the Grand Canyon is actually the world's biggest hole and you can look into it. Before painting it, I photographed it in 1982 with a collage technique, when it was quite difficult to do with cameras. It would be easier now.

Thanks for showing me these magical spots, it has been wonderful.

DH: Oh, there are loads of them. It goes on for miles and miles really. I've got a subject here that will keep me busy for a long time. So, naturally, you stay here – at my age you certainly do.

What took you back to painting? I mean, you have always been painting but there was a big phase of photography ...

DH: The return to painting came immediately after *Secret Knowledge*. It was essential for me to do *Secret Knowledge*, so I got a different view of history and then I went back to the hand and abandoned looking through cameras. JP looks through cameras, but I don't. In a way I understood what photography was and how it had occurred and how we're now in a new era with it. Meaning, it's altered; it's the same but it has changed. We don't know what the implication of that is yet. This is what is very new and what is coming. I mean the photograph is ubiquitous, it's everywhere; the images we see of the world are mostly of photographs.

It's very fascinating that you needed that research project to have this return to paintings. You make these detours and come back to paintings.

DH: You're absolutely right, yes. You make these detours and come back with a lot more confidence. The idea that one couldn't paint landscape any more – that it was a genre that was outdated – I realized couldn't possibly be true because of the way we see things. So you've got to do it by example: you've got to paint the pictures. So that's what I'm doing and we'll do a very, very big show at the Royal Academy eventually; to show people that you can look at nature and always be thrilled by it ... if we've got a reasonable head on our shoulders.

So the question of detour is useful to you?

DH: Oh yes, and I'm willing to make detours for quite long periods of time. There's a lady in California who I've known for ages – a contemporary music person, a friend of Stockhausen, in fact I've painted her at my Beverly Hills house – who said to me, 'I've just realized, David, that you don't mind if it takes a few years to find something out, do you?' and I said, 'No, I don't. In fact, I expect it to take a while.' When I got interested in the optics of European painting, I thought, 'This is too interesting, I've got to find out more about it.' I saw the connections with today: the camera is everywhere so why don't we explore this, see what it's doing and what it really does? For Susan Sontag to refer to the invention of the camera ... well, I would ask, can you name the inventor of the camera? Of course you can't, because there isn't one! There's an inventor of photography because that was about the invention of the chemicals, the process, but not the way of seeing, because this had been established some five hundred years before. That's what my book was saying: how people used photography wasn't important, the simple fact that they saw the world on a flat surface – and not through three dimensions – was key.

Ellsworth Kelly says that painting is somewhere between two and three dimensions, it oscillates between them.

DH: Well, we have a young friend who plays video games and he was showing me one, which is set in York [in North Yorkshire, England], a walled city that has many surrounding gates. He was shooting people ... of

course! I watched it for a while and then said, ‘Well, this is OK, but if you were in a real situation like this, the corner of your eyes would be very active, you would be constantly looking.’ I said to him, ‘What you should do is buy a pipe, fill it with tobacco, light it and go and take a walk on Flamborough Head [peninsula on Yorkshire coast]. Then you’ll realize that the world is truly three-dimensional. Go on, try that!’ His mother was appalled that I suggest he smoke a pipe ... so I said, ‘Well, go back to shooting the people in York then!’ Anyway, regardless of that, people are always referring to the amazing three-dimensionality of these video games, but, in actual fact, they are flat – the camera can’t deal with the corner of the eye like we do.

Has your interest in three-dimensionality in any way come from your excursions into theatre and opera?

DH: Maybe. I realized that with the second opera I did, *The Magic Flute*, designing stage sets was about using perspective games. I wanted to go back to painting but then *Secret Knowledge* happened, and then I realized it took me back to painting but in a new, very confident, way. Realizing what the photograph is; for instance, I couldn’t paint from a photograph because there isn’t enough information about the volumes for me, so I draw. When my assistant J-P was photographing the blossom, I pointed out that, in reality, the blossom seems bigger to the human eye than it actually is, because it’s so joyful and so exuberant. The camera sees everything geometrically whereas we see everything psychologically. There’s a big difference. We make it bigger when we look at it because we enjoy it so much.

On the subject of photography, can you, as is the case with many scientists, specify a particular moment when the joiner photographs were invented?

DH: It was in 1982 when someone from the Pompidou Centre had come to see me in LA because he was preparing a show of photographs. I wasn’t that interested, but he came anyway. I had lots of photos in albums and, to

make sure he got them all, he brought a Polaroid and photographed the photographs. He left a lot of the Polaroid film behind so I picked it up and made a picture of my house using about a hundred and thirty-two of them. That was the start. I remember thinking, ‘Ooh, this is fascinating.’ It was early February 1982: I’d just returned to California after spending a year in New York doing two triple bills for the Metropolitan Opera, so I was back in my studio alone. When you’re working in a theatre you’re never working alone and that means compromise. So back in my studio, I was pleased to be alone: I found myself absorbed with the Polaroid and I made quite a few elaborate pictures, realizing that you could alter perspective in photography. My photography friends had argued that perspective was built into the camera and so I began to see how I could make photos without perspective.

So you used the camera in a way that hadn’t been imagined before?

DH: The first exhibition we did with the Polaroids was called ‘Drawing with a Camera’ – I’ve still got the full archive from that time. Actually, I put the camera lucida drawings at the end of that show and it signalled the end of my experiments with photography. I felt that I understood the historical notion of what had happened, how the camera had become a big part of our lives. I realized that now I could chuck away the camera. You know, Van Gogh hated photography, and if you think about it, Cézanne and Monet were pointing out that they saw things in another way. And that’s been ignored now. Did you see the Picasso and Matisse exhibition in London [at Tate Modern in 2002]? When I first saw that, I went with Lucien Freud and Frank Auerbach; we went very early one morning when it was empty, and we had two hours to ourselves. It was marvellous. As we were coming out of the exhibition into the back rooms of the museum, there were four very large photographs – probably recent acquisitions – hanging on the wall. Lucien Freud and Frank Auerbach walked straight past them, but I stopped to look at them and I thought to myself, ‘Well, these photographs certainly make the world look awfully dull, whereas Picasso and Matisse had made it look awfully exciting.’ I prefer the excitement. The photographs were

recent, meaning that we are kind of going backwards; we don't understand what photography is any more, or what it did historically. Do you see what I mean? If you grasp history a bit differently, you come back to painting with an incredible confidence. You don't care about the arguments that painting is dead and so on. I'd actually say that it was photography that's dying or at least changing. It's becoming more like painting: that is what Photoshop is doing.

When you think about that old fax paper, you realize that some things are just ephemeral; they get lost.

DH: Loads of things get lost. Do you know the story about the Bettmann Archive? It is an archive of about eleven million photographs that was purchased by Bill Gates in 1995 – he thought he could digitalize them all. But he then found out that this wasn't possible, because to digitalize them he needed somebody to look at every photograph and be able to type in search words – 'winter', 'snow', 'street', 'New York', whatever – that would identify each picture. That means employing someone with a good vocabulary and a good eye ... if you've got those two things, who on earth would want to spend their life in a bunker looking at eleven million photographs? Consequently, they were buried in a salt mine in Pennsylvania in an attempt to preserve them. Some people argued that they were now lost and others argued that they might be found again in five hundred years' time. So are they lost? I pointed out that's how most things are going to end up. We'll end up as a handful of dust. Perhaps we're trying to keep far too much and perhaps by doing that we're not keeping much at all. The original title of my book *Secret Knowledge* was *Lost Knowledge*. Thames & Hudson changed it, thinking it would be better for sales. In a way I had become aware that knowledge was lost from the past and would be lost again in the future. It would be naive to think otherwise.

It's like memory. It's amazing to think how memory of all kinds of things is fragile. In some respects, my interviews are a protest against forgetting.

DH: Well, we deliberately forget some things: anyone who saw the terrible horrors of the Second World War wanted to forget them. The people who made something of it were those who hadn't seen any of it. Most people who had fought in it wanted to forget about it.

A kind of deliberate amnesia?

DH: Of course, most of our memories are pleasurable ones. We can't remember pain, for example. I've become very conscious that we see with memory. For example, one morning we went out: it was a fantastic clear day, blue skies, low sun, and we drove west. It was so clear. Once you've seen this, when you take that drive again, you'll always have the clarity of that memory, even if it's misty the next time you go there. We always take the same roads, see the same the trees, see them changing through the seasons. With the city streets you don't necessarily notice that. So what exactly is memory? Some people have even suggested that memory is outside of us, like radio waves, something you tune into again. It's fascinating.

Back at David Hockney's Bridlington studio

[Looking at canvas] So what we are seeing now is what you mentioned in the car, when the blossom appeared ...

DH: Yes, I had pointed out to JP that the blossom is going to come; he'd never seen it here before. So I calculated that by Thursday it would be out fully and these are the first things we did; I took canvases out straight away because you knew it wasn't going to last.

It's amazing, as if the trees have been painted.

DH: Oh yes, it's fantastic. So we photographed it, drew it and then painted it. I'd bring it back, then take it out again.

So sometimes you also paint on the photographs?

DH: Only that one; that's the only time. We usually make reproductions and I draw on those; it's something I'm always doing. On others I just paint it rather quickly, because it gets cold quickly.

You have realized such an amazing body of work, in painting and in all these other fields, but I was wondering if you still have unrealized projects? Or dreams that haven't happened yet ... ?

DH: Well, it's all happening here: us here, right now, we're in it, we're on it. We're all aware here that what we are doing is very exciting.

So let me understand better. The moment that you make a drawing, it gets scanned and then you work on the reproduction; it's like a chain?

DH: Yes. I start drawing, then I begin the painting, then I will draw on the reproduction that we make of the painting.

So it goes from digital to analogue, from the hand to the mechanical ...

DH: Yes, the thing is we are using technology, but you don't see that we are using technology. [*Pointing to huge canvas*] I mean, to do that great big painting I needed the computer, otherwise I couldn't see it. But remember: that big painting was all done by my hand only. Nobody else painted on that picture.

So one could say that here the computer didn't change what you drew; it simply gives you more possibilities.

DH: Yes. It took the ladder away. It's a tool, it's terrific. You can use them in all kinds of ways. It's not about computer art, it's just a tool.

I have spoken to many American artists of the pop generation and they are always saying that they really wanted to go beyond the gallery and on to bigger-scaled things like buildings, walls and billboards. Is that something that you've wanted to do?

DH: Not really. Do you know the name of the sculptor who did the Mount Rushmore sculptures? I think he was Hungarian: his name was Gutzon Borglum, which sounds like a fart in a bathtub! I'm not that interested in scale like that. First of all, I'm really interested in painting and not sculpture. I like the flat surface, what happens on it. I'm interested in the hand doing it, so there is a certain limit to scale, but we did achieve something when I did the big show at the Royal Academy [in 2007, which highlighted the fifteen-by-forty-foot, fifty-canvas painting *Bigger Trees Near Warter*]. I was well aware that there were crude aspects to the painting, but the second time I did one it would be less crude. And it was: the second one was nine [canvases] and not fifty. When I originally got the idea in LA, the very day, we rang the Royal Academy to ask, 'Can we have that big wall to exhibit a huge painting?' Then we immediately ordered seventy canvases, three foot by four foot, to be delivered to Bridlington in ten days. We also had to order seven drawers for the canvases to be put in when they were not being used, because they would be wet. Then I pointed out that we had got until April 15th to do the picture because at that point the leaves would be on the trees and spring would be here and winter would be over.

So nature created the deadline.

DH: It was nature's deadline, not the Royal Academy's. The RA's deadline was one month after that. If you've worked in the theatre you know the rule about deadlines: if you don't stick to them, the show still goes on anyway.

In some respects, nature is a form of the Duchampian readymade, so I wanted to ask you what your take on the readymade is?

DH: It's certainly an interesting idea, but I'm not sure that it is worth developing. In Paris, myself and a young German artist went to see the Picasso museum: I showed him the marvellous sculpture of the baboon and then we stopped for lunch before heading over to the Louvre. We only went to one section because we only had two hours, and in that time we found a baboon in the Louvre that is clearly the source for the Picasso. You can see

how similar they are. There are four thousand years between these two sculptures but one is not superior to the other. My point is that Picasso must have known of this sculpture – so is one an advance on the other? No.

What are your favourite museums?

DH: I rush to all museums. I like them all. We drove to Italy last year; we had a week in Florence, a week in Rome. But above all, I'm very, very fond of the Norton Simon Museum in LA; simply because it's not that far from the house and there are superb paintings and I always come out feeling fantastic.

In a previous interview, you mentioned the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico.

DH: Ah yes, they have a model of Mexico City before the conquest and it's all white. Every description of Mexico City says that it wasn't white, and that it was all different colours. So I said to them, 'Why don't you paint the model?' 'Oh no, we couldn't do that,' they said. Do you remember the arguments about the colourization of movies? Woody Allen went to Washington to complain about the colouring of black-and-white movies. I pointed out that his argument is not very good; it's the argument of a conservator and not an artist. An artist will take any work and colour it any way he wants, just as Duchamp stuck the moustache on the *Mona Lisa*. Artists will use things, steal things, appropriate things. As for colourization, I pointed out that people think the Greek sculptures were all white marble, but they were painted as well. All the ancient period was painted, it was all colour. We've gone through a black-and-white period, probably because of photography.

So you think that the post-photographic moment is again a reintroduction of radical colour. Do you have a colour theory?

DH: No, but I've been reading John Cage's book on colour. He condemns every colour theory; they just don't work. Here in Bridlington, the winter is more colourful than the summer. Going back to the readymade, it is an

interesting argument that in a way I can ignore at times, simply because I feel that my direction is going towards the hand-painted picture, the image; the strong image that will perhaps help us to see the world. Remember, the readymade was made in a period when many people felt that photography had replaced painting. In reality, painting is taking over photography. There are quite a few reversals going on: for most of my life St Petersburg was called Leningrad and no one would have ever thought it would be called St Petersburg again. Do you know what a really big problem for the United States is? That not one political-science department predicted the fall of Communism. Well, you should ask questions why. That means they didn't have any oddballs working for them; they didn't have anyone who looked at things in a different way. An oddball might have said that all of this will eventually collapse, which of course it did.

How do you see the future?

DH: Sometimes I'm very pessimistic. The more you know about history, the more you see that we like violence and destruction. Deep down, I think we know that we'll eventually just blow ourselves up. That's what we seem to want to do. But on the other hand I then spend an evening with Celia [Birtwell, close friend] and her little grandchildren, and when children are around, you find that you're not as pessimistic. But I'm not around children that much any more, since my friends' children have now grown up. That makes a big difference.

DOMINIQUE
GONZALEZ-FOERSTER

I had a residency from the Cartier Foundation in the early 1990s. They invited me to this village in France, Jouy-en-Josas, where I worked for three months. I visited dozens of studios. One of these was Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's. We had an amazing conversation on art, architecture, literature and music, because her interests are so wide-ranging.

Gonzalez-Foerster featured in one of my earliest exhibitions. When I was still a student in 1992 I founded a small museum, dedicated to the Swiss modernist writer Robert Walser. I made a little museum in Gais, a village in Switzerland, in the Hotel Krone where Walser would pause on his endless walks and have a drink. I put a vitrine in the hotel, called it the Robert Walser Museum, and people came to see it. Gonzalez-Foerster was the second artist to exhibit in the vitrine: she put in a story about snow, because Walser froze to death in the snow on one of his walks. Six people were at the opening of the exhibit. It was spring, but it started to snow, and then the grandson of Robert Walser turned up, which was strange to us, as Robert Walser had no children. It turned out he was the grandson of a different Robert Walser, who seemingly invented the ballpoint pen.

A laboratory city

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *There are so many questions I'd like to ask you. I don't know where to start.*

DOMINIQUE GONZALEZ-FOERSTER: [*Laughs*] I still can't get over the fact that we've gotten to the point where instead of postponing we're actually starting.

What if we started with a rumour about Paris being on the verge of turning tropical?

DG-F: Yes, Paris is in the process of becoming tropical. Let me begin with the hard facts, or perhaps, even before turning to these facts, this desire – this desire for tropicalization. It goes back a few years now to when I set off around the world in search of tropical zones, tropical cities – places where plants and organic matter have a certain power. In my opinion, modernity in architecture comes fully into its own when confronted with an organic environment which is in itself robust or powerful. It struck me that in certain places, where a certain type of architecture was brought into relation with a certain type of vegetation, it suddenly took on a whole different look. And so that's what I wanted for Paris too. Seriously, though, what Paris really lacks is plant life, tropical life. Paris is too dry, too mineral, completely grey, and then last September I noticed a bunch of spiders – it was like in the *Tintin* comics: little ones, big ones – an amazing number of spiders. I don't know where they could have come from. The explanation we came up with was the increase in humidity, or maybe an insect missing from the food chain. In any event, there was an increase in the number of spiders. The second important fact, similarly coming from very basic observations from my balcony, was that I noticed moss coming up from the

cracks in the cement, like in a Kyoto Zen garden. Never, in the seven years that I'd lived there, had I ever seen moss on my balcony.

[Laughs] That's a sure sign of tropicalization!

DG-F: You bet it is.

You speak of tropicalization and not tropicality, rather in the way that Édouard Glissant speaks of creolization and not creolity.

DG-F: Exactly, because it's a process – an unfolding process. So you have these two very important facts: on the one hand, the mass of spiders; and, on the other hand, the moss. And then in the spring we had rains that everyone described as 'tropical'. It wasn't made up: we had rain every day – a true rainy season. As for the vegetation – if you're in any way observant and lucky enough to live, as I do, in a building where the entrance is full of plants – the vegetation tripled in volume this summer. I don't even know if people measured it, but it was striking. And I read an article last week in *Libération* which said that the planet was, on the whole, greener. This was noted recently because, contrary to what we often suppose, all the measurements indicate that the planet is getting greener and greener. And in Paris, it's incredible. For the first time, I actually find Paris pleasant, because I now feel this mass of greenery.

So it's no longer necessary to travel.

DG-F: Exactly! The tropicalization of Paris has finally made it possible to stay at home, well balanced amid the vegetal, organic and mineral ecosystems.

Whereas before you had to go away to find that. We should perhaps go back a bit to those trips now – some linked to urbanism and architecture. I'm thinking of the trips you made to Brazil or to Asia – of those adventures in search of different modernities, not 'the' modernity. Why this need to travel?

DG-F: Maybe because I grew up in Grenoble, a laboratory city, and, more precisely, in the neighbourhood of the Villeneuve.

Why do you say it was a laboratory city?

DG-F: Because in the 60s the city hall was run by socialists, and because during the same period there was a group of people, particularly an important group of urban planners at the university, as well as scientists, the Laue-Langevin Institute and so on, and because in Grenoble there's a scientific and urban-planning tradition of long standing. In the 60s it was a group of people who, along with the mayor, Hubert Dubedout, transformed Grenoble and decided to make it a laboratory city. And the Villeneuve, the neighbourhood where I grew up, was created by these people. It's a neighbourhood inspired by Le Corbusier. Of course, Grenoble also began developing as a new city in the 50s. You might say it's the anti-Bordeaux or anti-Lyon – of course, there's the old downtown, but it's above all a modern city. And I also think that has a lot to do with why all the people who came out of the Grenoble School of Fine Arts – which was a more 'digital', more scientific, school than the others, rather than a painting school – Philippe Parreno, me, and others, were influenced by certain things. I also think it can be explained in the Grenoble context: a scientific, intellectual, experimental and laboratory-like city. However, when I was little, I had no idea I was growing up in a laboratory city. But I nevertheless went to the experimental school and lived in the experimental neighbourhood – in the whole academic, scientific environment, which understandably influences one deeply. In a more bourgeois city, I would have been influenced in a different way and would have had a different relationship to culture. I should also add that today I live in a modern building and I can't imagine living in an old building. I think I'll always seek out this modernity. And so when I went to Chandigarh for the first time, it wasn't like I was returning to my village, but, well, like I was going to rediscover ... I was going to look for something that had influenced me.

Were you interested in the utopian dimension of these projects?

DG-F: Not necessarily in the utopian aspect, actually, but the experimental one. When I was little, I had the good fortune of going to an experimental school: it started much later than the other schools; the first day of school we worked exclusively on mushrooms; we called the teachers by their first names. And then my parents had, so to speak, an experimental life as well: they were active in May '68, they had lived in Strasbourg, where the situationists were, and later in Grenoble in the Olympic Village. They had an experimental lifestyle. So it was more to do with the experimental than with the utopian, at once on the political level, the emotional level, and on many other levels as well.

*How did this environment influence your work, your spaces?
Because it's not entirely coincidental that you talk about the
experimental environments you grew up in, and today you
describe your works as more like environments than pieces.*

DG-F: Of course not. Having grown up in this context, my spaces are experimental. The empty spaces, the parts they leave free, the fact that they're structured neither by symmetry nor in their construction, nor with the aim of filling them up, but on the contrary are freeing. That was the idea behind the Villeneuve: to free up the ground space, build upwards in order to free up the park as an area of adventure. The same went for Brasília, with all its esplanades, its spaces that have potential. It's sort of the enlargement of Donald W. Winnicott's concept in *Playing and Reality*; he argued that after the separation from the mother, there's the discovery of the play space, a space that later becomes a potential space. I believe that my research in the space of the city has always been directed towards potential spaces. The banks of the river in Kyoto, with the telephone conversations in *Riyo* [1999] – that's a potential space. The huge esplanade, the enormous empty centre and its vast lawns in the middle of Brasília – a central emptiness is much more powerful than a full centre – that's what I call a potential space. That was what I tried to show in Stockholm as well: the idea that architecture's greatest strength lies perhaps not in its full spaces, but in its empty spaces. And then there is, of course, the wonderful idea of the Beaubourg Plaza, the

idea of opening up that area – it's perhaps more beautiful than the Beaubourg itself.

So you think it would be best to leave that space open where the Twin Towers stood in New York?

DG-F: And create a potential space. Let's hope so! Let's hope that we won't see the Berlin syndrome of identical reconstruction come back again, and that we'll see something other than the triumph of some phallic thing or symbol – that instead there will be a huge esplanade that can be used for future projects.

That brings us right back to Japan and Tokyo – to your research, your great love affair, your obsession, so to speak, with Japan and Japan's with you. It's a form of possessive reciprocity, which cropped up again just recently in Yokohama.

DG-F: What was very surprising during my first trip to Japan was that I felt immediately at home. Of course, other people have had this feeling, but for me it was striking. What does it mean to feel at home? It doesn't necessarily mean finding the same things you have at home; it means you feel surrounded by affection, taken care of – you feel good. Feeling at home, not in the sense of being part of a family, but of feeling secure. And in spite of the fact that I didn't speak a word of Japanese, I had the impression that everything spoke to me, each and every detail: each and every doorway was my size, every gesture told me something. And so there was already, right from the beginning, a form of reciprocity: the attention I conferred on things was, in a way, given back. And then I was fascinated right away by the playfulness of the architecture, by the gaming, by the number of possibilities explored, which are – when compared to Paris or other cities – infinitely greater. I was fascinated by this type of investigation into what architecture could be – in a manner that was completely prolific and organic. But that was only part of it; there was also the temperature, the food, the pleasure of seeing this concentration of people. There were so many things I could immediately relate to – it was a bit like Barthes's

description of the feelings of being in love: everything was a sign to me, super-significant. And in that state, when everything is super-significant, you're very happy – it's above and beyond language. I had the impression of being in an environment where the verbal was not a determining factor; there were so many dimensions that spoke to me directly that I could skip language. And for years, in fact, I refused to speak Japanese in order to remain in that state of non-verbal hyper-receptivity.

That was back in the 80s.

DG-F: Yes, in 1987, and things just went from there because, subsequently, I went back again and again, until today I find myself unable to imagine a year going by without a trip to Japan. I feel that aspect of Japan which is often spoken about: its maternal dimension, along with its very disturbing, controlling aspects. Yet I feel surrounded by its affectionate and gentle dimension as well. To me, it felt like an immersion. Research is a permanent feature for me – and it's particularly the case for my series of *Chambres* [1989 to date] – because I've always looked for a relationship to the environment, an immersion, rather than a relationship to the object. I've never been interested in a relationship with something you can hold, but rather in a relationship with things that surround us. And that, I think, is precisely what I found in Japan.

Wasn't that the premise of the work you showed in Yokohama [Petite, 2001]?

DG-F: In fact, for the Yokohama piece you have to go back further, back to the Villeneuve neighbourhood I spoke about. When I was ten or eleven years old – and here I'm going to tell you about something that's as anti-maternal as it gets – my mother wanted us to go to Germany with my two brothers. But I really didn't want to go; I fought against this trip and asked to stay at home. Finally, my mother said it was all right for me stay at home, and so I lived at home all alone for a couple of days – and for a child of ten or eleven, that was a pretty strange experience. I think it was then that I experienced my most terrifying and visionary moments. I remember

perfectly the moments of terror and, at the same time, the moments that were completely new to me, being in touch with your imagination. And, perhaps, the fact of not speaking for a few days. It was in fact something very similar to what I later discovered in Japan: the thrill of not speaking, of simply being in an environment. I remember that moment perfectly. And the little girl in Yokohama behind the glass was exactly that: someone who has taken up with the act of watching and all that it entails. It's the connection between watching and seeing: seeing not what's in front of you, but rather inside of you. It was an attempt at reproducing this childhood experience.

The viewer remaining outside ...

DG-F: Yes, and the viewers can see themselves in the little girl, like a reflection in a mirror.

Did you do that bit of animation in Japan?

DG-F: It was done using animation and takes the place of any viewer. But no, it was done here in Paris. It's the continuation, in a certain way, of the first little girl, who was at the entrance to the exhibition 'Elysian Fields' [Rosebud, 2000]. It's an adaptation of that little girl, but it's really a return to that early experience. A few years ago I asked my mother, 'How ... why did you leave me all alone like that?' I had begun psychoanalysis and the memory had come back to me, so I asked her the question. And she replied, 'You really wanted to and you seemed so sure of yourself.' So I believe it was at once experiencing my autonomy and ... Paradoxically, it's in Japan – the country where I found this maternal holding – that I manage to show this experience – one that remains for me truly fundamental to my relationship to the city. That's what we feel with the little girl: behind her, the images of the city file past. It's linked to the way we move through things, and to how a form of autonomy can be a constituent element in relation to images.

I remember the discussion we had while preparing 'Cities on the Move' [various locations, 1997–2000]. You told me at the time

that your relationship to Asia went way back to your childhood, and I think that became clear in your exhibition in Cologne at the Schipper und Krome Gallery as well [‘Séance de Shadow III’, 1999].

DG-F: Yes, it’s funny because the photos of me as a child show very clearly that I was Japanese at birth [*laughs*]. I was born Japanese with very long, black hair. Right away I was given a little Japanese haircut – like so. I was born ‘yellow’ – that’s what my mother always said to me. And until I was three, I think I looked totally like a little Japanese girl. And then later, as I got older, when I was given children’s books that were set in Japan or had something to do with Asia somewhere, I completely identified with those books. I don’t know how to explain it. I believe that one of my grandparents was of Asian descent – but still, that’s going very, very far back. I honestly can’t explain it, but it’s been the case ever since my childhood in fact. I was born Japanese.

And in the piece at Esther Schipper’s?

DG-F: There I was investigating her history, along with my relationship to that history. I discovered that she was born and grew up in Taipei, and that her father, Christopher Schipper, who was a Taoist and an important scholar, went there to be adopted by a family and become a Taoist priest. And then we discovered all these photos, and the exhibition is a sort of mixture of these images. At that time, I also went to the Chinese neighbourhood every day to look for traces, clues to it all – combinations between all these elements.

You’ve participated in many projects with different artists, and this activity relates somewhat to what Douglas Gordon called a ‘promiscuity of collaboration’ in reference to certain artists in the 90s. As I see it, what has begun to change in the last few years is that today it’s less a question of collaboration between artists than of collaboration extending to other practices. In this sense, you seem to me the perfect example of this development, in that

you've worked with musicians, composers, architects, and have made use of literature. I'd like to know if you also feel there's been a shift, a change in this sense. And I'd like you to go back a bit and talk about your collaboration with Jay-Jay Johanson in Dijon ['Cosmodrome', Le Consortium, Dijon, 2000].

DG-F: Yes, it's very clear. In any case, whether it's Philippe [Parreno] or myself, we work in dialogue. But I've come to realize that dialogues where differences are greater often end up being more productive than dialogues with artists. In dialogues between artists, you always wind up with a similar language. As for myself, I'm very curious about how other things function – whether in architecture or music or literature. That's only the beginning: just recently I worked on a project with a future architect, Martial Galfione – a housing, building project. It was a proposition for mobile units for artist residencies. There is an obvious continuity with 'Quelle architecture pour Mars?' [Le Consortium, Dijon, 2001] even if it was also about a film at the same time. I'm not kidding around when I ask the question 'What architecture for Mars?' – it really obsesses me. I'd say we're really going to have to think about this question [*laughs*]. It's no mere joke. And so that gives way to a really nice discussion because I bring images and ideas into the equation, whereas he proposes things. It's the same with the house we're building for this collector in Japan – a project I'm working on with an architect, Camille Excoffon. And then there's also the film for Seoul [102, 2000] that we did together with Ole Scheeren – an architect as well. So there's that whole dimension at the moment, what with all these collaborations.

With the architect Philippe Rahm as well?

DG-F: Yes. With Philippe Rahm, things are going to start with a discussion, which will no doubt lead to other things. For now, this discussion – which takes place not with any particular architect, but with architecture as a whole – is the one I had with the buildings when I went to see all those cities, and which has now shifted towards people. I looked at all those

places, and now I have to convert that to people – so it can take on new dimensions. How should I put it? You know, it's not easy to talk about all that.

I was wondering if all this wasn't connected to the remark you made where you said that perhaps you no longer wanted to do exhibitions.

DG-F: Yes, that's also part of it. It's the possibility of a complete renewal of this idea of the exhibition through tackling other temporalities, other formats, other ways of working. And when you are, in that way, confronted with other ways of working – because architecture or music truly are different ways of working – you realize to what extent an exhibition can be fascinating in its laboratory dimension. That was also what your exhibition 'Laboratorium' [co-curated with B. Vanderlinden, various venues throughout Antwerp, 1999] was all about; the hypothesis that for people coming from other disciplines – for a biologist, an architect, a writer – the exhibition is a very satisfying form because it's much quicker and far more stimulating. There are many architects who get excited right away about the idea of doing exhibitions, because they're caught up in the deadlines, in constraints that are utterly different. So I think the exhibition is perhaps the experimental form par excellence.

[Laughs] So 'exhibition' is synonymous with 'Grenoble'.

DG-F: *[Laughs]* But afterwards there's Mars – first comes Grenoble, and then comes Mars. Mars is an entirely different story, though. At some point, you have to be able to get out of the laboratory. Even if you worked on full-scale projects in the laboratory – even if, in itself, each innovative building remains a prototype – at a given moment you still have to go to Chandigarh, to Brasília, and see how it all functions. That was when I went off to see all those cities. It was at a time when I couldn't imagine not moving on to the habitable dimension, the fordable dimension – to this potential space where I couldn't even imagine myself *not* being able to enlarge the experiences

which had been done in the framework of the exhibition, and carrying them into another space.

Which brings us to your work in the Paris Métro station Bonne Nouvelle.

DG-F: Yes, ultimately it was possible to apply the whole programme, all these ideas which are not ideas about art as an object, but rather ideas that are linked to ways of exploring the latent potential in each thing, a way of saying, ‘Here are some seats, yet if we put two of them together it will trigger something. Over there, there are some posters, yet it’s possible to use them in a different way.’ It’s not about some gesture of *tabula rasa* and renewal, but rather of reconsidering existing vocabulary and allowing things to voice different meaning. Then, suddenly, a light becomes a string of lights, a publicity billboard becomes a projection screen, letters start to dance. This has nothing to do with the idea of relocating art there like some supplementary object, but rather it’s far more about a method of transformation. It’s not a readymade, but a conjunction, because at the same time it’s not a thing either. It’s not the revelation of a thing that’s made apparent, but the conjunction of a vocabulary – a complex language in fact. And I think that this is what the 90s, compared with the 80s, has achieved. We’ve moved beyond the stage – that I rather like in fact – of putting the fridges on top of televisions; we’ve moved beyond the object and into a zone of articulation. In my opinion, this is the way that film has served as a metaphor. If we’ve made such abundant use of the analogy with film, it’s because here we could take the example of a language that articulated the sound, the image – a language which was based on a conjunction of elements.

Can we return to the question of the exhibition, inasmuch as the exhibition has to do with this interior complexity? I spoke about it recently with Philippe Parreno, and he told me that for him – and, in his opinion, for you too – Lyotard’s exhibition ‘Les Immatériaux’ [Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985] was decisive. In what way was this exhibition a key moment? What were the other

exhibitions that influenced you or particularly struck you in the 80s, and then in the 90s? Truly striking exhibitions are, after all, quite rare.

DG-F: Yes, exhibitions that make a mark are rare. ‘Les Immatériaux’ was truly a memorable exhibition. Strangely enough, my most memorable experiences have been in environments, complete environments – for example, when I actually went to see Pierre Loti’s house – rather than in exhibitions per se. In exhibitions, I’ve rarely found the excitement I felt when I went into the Musée Gustave Moreau or a full-fledged environment. That’s what I tried to reproduce in exhibitions – in other words, not just reproducing the object detached from its context. This is also something you can explore in London, in the house of Sir John Soane. I had seen the house before; it was on the list of environments that I find very stimulating because art doesn’t appear detached from a context, but is, on the contrary, part of the whole. And I must admit that I do have trouble finding exhibitions where I can feel the notion of environment. Later, of course, there was the fascination with panoramas, but what I think was still really beautiful in ‘Les Immatériaux’ was the exploration of all the dimensions of light and sound by means of infrared and text. The viewer’s movement was taken fully into consideration. For all those reasons, it was actually a very important exhibition.

In relation to this notion of environment, but also in your desire to explore new ways of exhibiting film or sound, could you go back a bit to the Dijon projects? You told me a few months ago that they might be your last exhibitions. And I think, at least from a rhetorical point of view, that any exhibition could be the last exhibition.

DG-F: No, when I said that, it wasn’t just rhetoric. I no longer consider the two Dijon proposals to be exhibitions.

Rather as trans-exhibitions. We’ll have to come up with a neologism.

DG-F: [*Laughs*] I haven't found a name. On the one hand, there's a 'cosmodrome', and on the other hand, there's a question: 'What Architecture for Mars?' – a title that is at once serious and nutty, deliberately both exploratory and informative. I thought this title could be exciting for all sorts of different people, for architects or for scientists. In this sense, it's not an exhibition, but I have yet to find the word that suits the project. In any case, that took place after the exhibition. It functions in a global way, not through focusing attention – which is one of the specific qualities of the exhibition, in other words the pointing out of a certain number of elements. In that sense, many exhibitions are based on islands. They are the outcome; each work is a type of island. 'Cities on the Move' goes beyond this cartography of works that assigns each work a sort of place. In Dijon, both with 'Cosmodrome' and 'Quelle architecture pour Mars?' I sought out an overall way of working that didn't allow for the isolation of the parts. And I did so in spite of the fact that in 'Quelle architecture pour Mars?' it remains possible to enter into the film at a particular moment. But we remain in the framework of a language, of a complete space with its slanting walls. It's impossible to dislocate or isolate one thing or another.

I also had in mind another exhibition, which really made an impression on me: 'Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk', curated by Harald Szeemann in Zurich ['In Search of Total Artwork', Kunsthaus Zürich, 1983]. It was an idea that was at once extremely important and dangerous.

DG-F: Yes, I think that's why I've always preferred the word 'environment' over the word 'installation'. I find that, as a metaphor for nature, it's right on. For me, there's a hardware-store side to installation, whereas with the notion of environment there's a dimension that's romantic, natural. And in the idea of the total work of art, there's something that scares me. I find it's linked to the idea of domination – something that's a bit disturbing. On the other hand, I believe a lot in the fact that we are at once – and this was also present in Yokohama – inside as a viewer, and at the same time we're on the

outside. This is a fundamental issue, because it's a position that must always be explored, whether we're faced with ideas, or in a city, or facing somebody. It must be possible to see and to have autonomy towards this thing. In this sense, I'm very resistant with regard to the art object, because as I see it, the relationship to an object or a thing is all too obvious a relationship. I prefer to be in a relationship with something that's around me, but which I am, at the same time, myself around. I'd rather explore that kind of complex situation. There are many examples of enveloping works that allow for – at the same time and at certain moments – being outside of them. There's an entire history of works like that. And, in any case, architecture is just that: you go out, you go in, and so on. That's the particular quality I'm after. For me, the exhibition becomes fossilized when a series of objects are lit up like so many dots. Whereas it is freed when the idea of moving through the exhibition becomes a decisive factor: when different sensorial levels are called upon; when we don't remain stuck on the optic, scopic impulse; and where our actions are conditioned by what we hear. This synaesthetic dimension is fundamental. If we remain purely scopic – though it can remain very powerful all the same, because the eye is closest to the brain – we lose so many dimensions.

In the area of sound, there's your work with Jay-Jay ... And, of course, there's also the question of smell.

DG-F: Smell ... Actually, I haven't yet had many occasions to tackle that one, but it's very important because every place has its own smell, and that is bound to intensify the experience. What's very important in 'Cosmodrome' is that no point of view is favoured; you find yourself in that whole mass of sand. We worked on all the dimensions: on top, underneath, on the sides. Though it begins on a painting, a computer, afterwards all the different directions are possible. The question of viewpoint disappears. It's the awareness of an unlimited environment that is not objectified and immediate – it's the highway for the art of the future. As for myself, I've been working for some time on a book on descriptions of art and architecture of the future in science fiction. And in fact, you realize that it

really coincides: the art of the future is often described as an art of
ambiance, a dematerialized art. One of the most recurrent things in science
fiction is the sound and light organ: a type of machine that lets you produce
environments. I trust science fiction to have a feeling for that. The
‘Cosmodrome’ was, in a way, a dematerialization. I always sincerely
thought that we were going to get to the year 2000 and a whole series of
works – which perhaps I myself wouldn’t understand – would emerge,
works that would function at a completely different level. Perhaps they’re
on the verge of emerging. I’ve always had this fantasy with regard to the art
of the future. I hardly even want to talk about the notion of contemporary
art any more – the question of the art of the future interests me more.

*The transition is plain to see: what are your future projects, your
unrealized projects?*

DG-F: In the long term [*laughs*] ... In the very long term, the project is to go
beyond the exhibition, or to have the exhibition set up permanently.

Urban planning?

DG-F: Yes, urban planning, existence, and no longer just a laboratory. I want
to go beyond the model stage. And that note, I think, makes a pretty good
conclusion.

Developing hybrids

*In a previous conversation, we were speaking about working in
fields other than contemporary art and you mentioned Frederick
Kiesler.*

DG-F: One reason Kiesler is less famous than other artists, even though he
did much more interesting work, is that he also pursued architectural
projects, doing windows in big department stores, spaces for galleries – all
sorts of things. He never wanted to be only a gallery artist. I never met him,
but from what I’ve read of his writing and seen of his work, I have the
feeling that he tried to expand the way we experience the world. Of course,

this had its price: he never became as famous as many of the more specialized artists, although I suspect his houses and everything he developed have indirectly influenced them in ways they wouldn't even suspect. I think some people, like Kiesler – or [Isamu] Noguchi, too, when he's doing furniture or lamps – realize that galleries, museums and exhibitions are not the only kinds of spaces. But art history is hard on this kind of *plan d'évasion* – on the way that some artists try to escape a linear way of developing their career. Usually, these artists are rediscovered much later. The art world is extremely conservative when it comes to any attempt to escape the established path.

Since we recorded our last interview two years ago, you've implemented many of these expanding projects: a house in Japan, a park in Kassel at documenta IX, and a public sculpture in Grenoble.

DG-F: I always need to be involved in experimental processes. I like not knowing how to do things at the beginning and then slowly finding the right approach. Many exhibitions don't give you this learning opportunity any more. With the house in Japan, I was constantly interacting with people who could explore new things with me – for example, the builder, with whom I've discussed a possible grid for the structure. Or with the park, we're talking about how to develop the meadow and lawn. This is the kind of thing I enjoy. To me, a day when I don't learn ten new words is a lost day. I like meeting people who are very specialized in their respective fields. They teach me so much. This is something I don't see enough of in the art world. It rarely happens that I feel that sudden, penny-dropping moment where I can develop something through a new situation.

I've always felt that routine is the enemy of exhibitions.

DG-F: It's true! And although it may sound a bit harsh, I want to collaborate and develop things with people who are working at the same intensity as I am. It doesn't matter if they're carpenters, translators or whatever. You see, there's something incredibly slow about the art world. In an architecture

project, changing a door takes two hours, but in a museum it can take a week or even a month. Or when they build a stage for a concert in one day, they've accomplished more in terms of activity than they do in a gallery over the space of one year. Once you've experienced the terrible preciousness and slowness that accompany even the smallest changes in the world of art, you lose some of your patience. Of course, it's normal that each system would have its own speed, but once you've become accustomed to working at a different pace, it's really hard to return to a situation where painting even a little wall is a problem. Walls in museums are treated as if they were a white canvas, so every little gesture becomes monumentally important. I'm really tired of that!

But the number of projects in which you've broken free of the limitations of the museum has increased exponentially since our last interview. For example, we're sitting right now in the café of the Cité de la Musique, where you were involved in the display of a sonic exhibition called 'Espace Odyssée' ['Espace Odyssée: Les Musiques spatiales depuis 1950', 2004].

DG-F: Yes. This is more like something Kiesler would have done: designing a space for a special purpose. It's not that I want to be completely subjective and go my own way. I'm the opposite: I want to interact as much as possible with all types of questions.

To produce different realities?

DG-F: But not only in the context of print, or in a lecture. That's why I'm always very happy when I get proposals for entirely different things. I really hope I'll be able to continue pursuing questions in even more distant fields, where I can interact and develop hybrids. This is so much better than continuing to go in circles. It's happened before, for example in the 50s. There have been moments when there was a spreading of artists' interest into other fields.

This position was also strong in the Russian avant-garde.

DG-F: Yes. Its radicalness was based on interactions with a diverse range of systems and structures. The key is the experimental approach. This is also why the art world desperately needs a few scientists to come in and shake things up. Every field needs to be disturbed by other discourses. I don't believe art is a meta-field of knowledge that stands above all else. There's something self-indulgent about the art world that I want to escape. This is why the title of the park in Kassel is *Plan d'évasion* [2002], or *A Plan for Escape*. Wanting to escape situations that are too slow, too repetitive, or too dead-end is very human. It's what drives transformation – I don't want to say evolution, but transformation. The moments when you feel the need to escape are when you realize that you're very alive. This is probably the best thing you can experience. If you lose that desire to escape, then you're in trouble.

I recently spoke with someone working in the field of architecture, and he told me about 'this great new landscape architect, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster'. He was completely unaware that you had an artistic background! And there are other people who see your films at film festivals and talk about this emerging young film-maker. Suddenly, you've gained this multitude of identities, which is beautiful not only in and of itself, but also because it opens you up to many different contexts of production.

DG-F: I don't want my films to be seen as artist's films or my gardens to be seen as artist's gardens. I think it's important for artists to develop their role as producers or directors, which means providing audiences with an enjoyable or stimulating public situation. After all, exhibitions, theatre pieces and films serve this purpose, too. And I think it's normal that artists working in this capacity should ask for a fee.

That's what happened, for example, with the video set you produced for the singer Alain Bashung in 2003.

DG-F: Exactly! At the beginning we agreed on a certain amount for the job, and I'm content with that. In contrast, when you ask for a fee in a show,

they tell you, ‘Ah, but maybe you can sell this work in a gallery.’ I think it would be beneficial if artists had the opportunity to choose a path that wasn’t linked to craftsmanship or selling objects; they could choose to work in a public situation and provide a kind of show or spectacle and be paid for it. If it were clear for art students from the very beginning that they had more options than just teaching at an institution or working with galleries, it would lead to much more interesting art. I’d like to work towards this change.

Your approach seems to resist dependency.

DG-F: I’m autonomous, you know. I haven’t done a gallery show now since I don’t know how long, and I don’t have any planned. I like the galleries I work with – they’re run by great people – but at the moment it’s not the place where I feel I can experiment and work the best. Of course, I must admit that, in a Duchampian kind of way, I used to enjoy the casino-like aspect of today’s art world – the total lack of a rational link between the amount a work is sold for and the work itself. At one point, I found this game to be very funny. But you can be childish about this and become obsessed with the funny numbers, or you can delve deeper into the situation and realize that this money came from somewhere – that it was made in a certain way. It’s not just paper, you know. Tracing the path the money has travelled can turn up some strange surprises. I’m not talking about money-laundering. I’m just saying that you can think a little deeper, and all the fun in saying I sold this for that much begins to dissipate. Works created with the most critical intentions can end up in a sale or in a safe or in a very depressing context. I’m not a Marxist; I’m not a communist. I’m just trying to go beyond a very teenage view of art, this idea that ‘for years we didn’t make any money, so now we can drink champagne and live in big houses’. This is why it’s important to develop options for up-and-coming artists that will allow them to make a living doing exhibitions. Imagine a situation where artists can apply to a research institute. This, together with providing a fee for participating in an exhibition, would be a way to create new attitudes and new kinds of work that are disconnected from certain formats.

Of course, artists who want to supply the market with objects should be free to do so, but I'd like to see a world in which it's possible to have both situations.

I'm curious to know more about your collaboration with people in other fields beyond art.

DG-F: I started by collaborating with visual artists, and from that I learned how to collaborate with professionals in other fields. Nowadays, working together with someone like Alain Bashung or Nicolas Ghesquière from Balenciaga is a way to increase this exchange. I'm still happy to collaborate with other artists, but I've come to realize that the practice is often too similar to really learn anything new.

You just mentioned two very concrete collaborations – one with a musician and the other with a fashion designer. What did you learn from them?

DG-F: I learned how they work in a commercial context while still protecting their inspiration. I wanted to prove that you can interact with professionals in other fields even if you're trained as a visual artist! Ghesquière or Bashung metabolize lots of things, dealing with so many people and details. It's inspiring.

The complexity?

DG-F: Yes. It's the ability to pursue a very singular, subjective, creative process and still be able to bring many other people into this process and avoid being isolated. A glass of water is a glass of water, a camera is a camera, and a light is a light – they don't have any extra symbolic value. They're real, and there's no need for endless discussions overloaded with metaphors.

Could I ask you about your unrealized projects?

DG-F: For some years now, I've been dreaming about doing a swimming pool on the beach – a kind of 'tropical university'. There will be big

umbrellas and you'll be able to sit in the water at the beach and talk about projects! Do you know Carlos Basualdo? He's doing the 'Tropicália' show ['Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture', 2006–7]. One part is historical, but he also wanted to have some contemporary artists submit proposals. I'd like to suggest a tropical university on the beach. Another exciting thing about this project is the chance to work with Arto Lindsay, because he's also involved in 'Tropicália'. I've always liked his music and his unique way of dealing with electric guitar.

So you'll be inventing a new type of seminar?

DG-F: Yes, because I've been reading the book you gave me by Cedric Price, and I no longer want to build anything. At the moment, I only have visions of things that are horizontal or go deep. I don't believe in verticality. It should still be possible to provide a new type of stimulating space. Maybe it won't be a swimming pool, exactly, but what I like about Rio or Copacabana is that people on the beach always look as if they were taking part in a giant meeting or opening. I'd like to go further with this feeling of the dynamic beach. I was so happy when Carlos asked me to get involved, because this is how I want to feel – half Japanese and half Brazilian! This is my twin identity.

Before this interview, we spoke about your sabbatical year. The idea was to give you the opportunity to radically reassess how you approach time.

DG-F: Yes. My idea for 2005 was to take a trip around the world without having any plans. As it turned out, I never went on a world tour, but had two long stays: one in Rio de Janeiro to work on 'Sitio Experimental Tropical' [terrace, balustrade and panorama], and the other in Paris to edit a series of films called *Parc Central* using video footage shot around the world over the past seven years [eleven short films, 1998–2003, MK2 Editions / Anna Sanders Films, Paris, 2006]. *Parc Central* is conceived like a music album and connects different urban and non-urban experiences in a way similar to the approach I took with *Residence: Color* in 1995. And then

my daughter was born in November 2005, and everything changed yet again.

You wanted to build a house in Brazil. Can you tell me about Rio and Lina Bo Bardi?

DG-F: I didn't really build a house in Brazil – that might be the next step. Two years ago I found a place: an incredible terrace in the landscape, a fantastic open-air space hidden from the street by an old house. The house needs a bit of renovation and transformation to become part of what I call 'Sitio Experimental Tropical', a place to experiment with the effects of tropicalization on ideas, desire and projects. Rio is an incredible city in a fantastic geological location, with lots of great architecture and a pre-individualistic mood – the organic, fertile influence of the tropical vegetation and climate is something that's out of control. Lina Bo Bardi loved Rio, but she did considerably more work in São Paulo and Salvador da Bahia. She was lucky to build quite a lot in Brazil; it's unlikely she would have been able to do as much if she had stayed in Europe. Her suspended museum, the rough but colourfully detailed SESC Pompéia, and some of her very special houses have had a permanent effect on me.

What's your next project?

DG-F: Writing a science-fiction novel together with Philippe Parreno; continuing to think about new sorts of public spaces and playgrounds, as I did for the current São Paulo Biennale [2006]; working on an opera/exhibition with lots of artists and friends for the Manchester International Festival; preparing a proposal for the Skulptur Projekte in Münster; and, of course, remaining unpredictable, even to myself!

Endings

I'm very happy to have this conversation with you here in Manchester for the world premiere of Il Tempo del Postino [Postman's Time]. Philippe Parreno and I came up with the idea of a group show in which artists are given time rather than space.

What were your thoughts when you first heard of the project, and what is the genesis of your contribution to it?

DG-F: My first thought was to incorporate existing works into the project – together with music, light, performances and objects. The idea was to bring them all on stage and build a kind of scenography. But, for me, the most interesting part was trying to think of an ending. You see, more than ten years ago I gave a lecture on ‘The Endings of Films’. I’ve always been very interested in endings. In French I often say, ‘*tout finit mal*’ – everything ends badly.

This is true in operas; they rarely have a happy ending. The death of a main character always makes things more dramatic. At any rate, Philippe thought I should return to this film idea, and so I went through a variety of film endings to see if they could be adapted somehow for the stage. For me, one of the crucial moments in cinema was the 1973 science-fiction movie *Soylent Green* directed by Richard Fleischer. It’s set in 2022 and shows an overpopulated world where euthanasia has been made available to the public, and people can choose how they want to die. So my piece also addresses the issue of euthanasia. This would be an interesting theme for an opera, since it’s still very ...

... taboo?

DG-F: Exactly. And the challenge here was to translate the moment in *Soylent Green* where the actor Edward G. Robinson, playing the character Sol, chooses the light and music that are going to accompany his own death, which he refers to as ‘going home’. It’s a theatre-like situation, and a very extreme moment, in the movie. When I first saw the film, I was only thirteen and I cried for almost three days. My first decision was to avoid using an image from the film, because that would have been too easy. So the question remained: how could we use the stage, the area around it, the pit, and the orchestra to perform this death at the end of the whole show? My solution was to have the orchestra die away with the music – that is, to

instruct the musicians to leave the pit one by one and let the music slowly dissolve into nothingness.

The music was from Beethoven's Sixth, the 'Pastoral' Symphony, which was used in *Soylent Green* to create a strong contrast between the high-spirited music and the moment of death.

During the rehearsals it was moving to see the musicians leave the pit one by one. As they left, carrying their instruments, you could see how some of them were also carrying a book or a bag. So you realized that they really were going home.

DG-F: Our first inclination was to provide detailed instructions, but we eventually decided it would be better to let them do it on their own and not tell them how they should behave or dress. This makes their departure much stronger. The musicians took great pleasure in performing the whole thing.

I'm curious about your approach to the element of time in the show. Many artists of our generation have resisted the homogenization of time, especially as brought about by processes of globalization. I sometimes wonder whether this is related to the desire for unmediated experience. Does this apply to you and the way you treat time in your work?

DG-F: Time is very connected to narrative, of course. There's this great book by Paul Ricoeur called *Temps et récit*. That was an important source while I was pondering how to bring time into space for exhibitions. But it's such an ... [laughs] endless subject. I hardly know where to start. Working as a museum guard many years ago, I was always frustrated to see how visitors would stop in front of a work of art for only a few seconds. This made me think that an artwork should somehow capture the visitor in a bubble of time and space. I had only one model to elaborate this, which was literature. You see, as soon as you have a potential narrative, the beginning of a text, then time appears. Back then, I used clues instead of text, creating a kind of trap that would keep the visitor contemplating the art a bit longer.

By exploring the dimension of time, I think we've succeeded in bringing a mutation into the exhibition. Think of Philippe's exhibition at the ARC, where works come to life, one after the other, on their own [*Alien Seasons*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/Animation Recherche Confrontation, 2002]. Yes, this for me was already a strong signal for *Il Tempo del Postino*. But as an exhibition viewer and a lover of this moment when you circulate in a space with all of your mind and body, and have the possibility to go in and out, laughing and talking, I always feel trapped in a theatre. I have problems with this situation. Some weeks ago, I went to see a play where the viewers were slowly walking out, one after the other, and I think this mirrors the idea with the orchestra. The opera house is a fantastic laboratory, but I never forget that I want the viewer to be free. I'm not ready to enter the you-must-stay-here condition.

I recently had a conversation with Eric Hobsbawm. He was saying that the world needs an international protest movement against forgetting. In your ways of working, memory is extremely dynamic, and you use this idea of the past as a kind of toolbox – not only as a way of revisiting the past, but as a way of producing something else. What are your toolboxes?

DG-F: I have the impression that my toolbox is as big as the planet itself. For me, a lot obviously comes from books and travel, but also through direct experience as much as through extremely mediated things. And everything is on the same level for me. As for the past as a toolbox, I have a dynamic relationship with the past. The past interests me when it harbours possible futures – that is, when it's used as it is in science fiction, rather than as a necrophilic kind of memory. My toolbox is more than various: it goes from walking by a building to watching a scene from a film, from hearing something on the radio to mixing all of that together. I would say that the ideal toolbox would allow very different things with very different functions to be combined. A toolbox for a montage – not really of film or video, but as a way of putting a piece of conversation together with a piece of fabric or part of a building, of associating a very abstract thought with an

extremely dense material, with speed, with a feeling you get in your left leg, with the ring of a telephone – for me, that would be the ultimate tool.

My last question is about collectivity. You've done so many things together with other artists, and with people from other fields. How do you feel about this being a group show, or about collectivity as a subject?

DG-F: For me, the powerful moment in art is one of heterogeneity. It's not characterized by one style, one signature or one idea. A group show or work that involves many sources is the most exciting thing that can happen. I'm always ready for an experience that involves this kind of multiplicity. There's simply a level of art that cannot be reached if you work alone. I also feel that art is something social. In recent years, there was perhaps less excitement about working on a museum show together because this is something we've already done so often. But when we heard of the proposal to work in this entirely different context, this laboratory, most of us were enchanted. It's like meeting in a new house and being given the chance to see things in an entirely different light. For me the orchestra is a way to represent this idea.

The production of reality

DG-F: It was just Easter in Paris. What was yours like?

I did what I usually never do: I slept the entire time. I spoke with Stefano Boeri this morning and he's currently obsessed with lethargy and how the best ideas often come to mind when people are in a lethargic state. In fact, he wanted me to begin the interview by asking your opinion about this.

DG-F: I completely agree, though I wouldn't call it lethargy. I think I'd use the term 'pause'. Pauses are very good for triggering ideas; in fact, I get most of my ideas at night. But ideas can happen anytime. This weekend I became obsessed with snow. It had been forecast, and I was waiting for it

impatiently. And why? Because I've spent so much time in the tropics, and the reverse obsession to the tropics is snow. It reminds me of the Bollywood movies that want to show something remote and exotic: they go to Switzerland or Austria and film the snow. Do you remember when we were in Gais?

Yes, as if it were yesterday. It was our first collaboration, and one of the first exhibitions for the Robert Walser Museum – a vitrine in Hotel Krone [1993]. If I recall correctly, it was also your first show in Switzerland, and it was snowing!

DG-F: Yes, I remember the snow. It was also around Easter.

Yes, it was exactly fifteen years ago, and there were only about ten guests at the opening, because these exhibitions were very intimate. Your piece produced reality in many different ways, because you were working on this vitrine that was related to snow, and then it started to snow outside.

DG-F: I recently found those images again, and I was thinking it would be nice to use them for our book. I feel this snow scene is just as important as tropicalization, in fact. It's really the first time I've been so obsessed with snow. Perhaps that's because it was just a fact of life when I was growing up, just as it must have been for you. But now I've discovered its beauty and the incredible excitement that can accompany it. It also makes me think of Robert Walser and his relationship to snow – his last winter walk into the snowy landscape. It's the beginning and the end at the same time, a kind of climatic white cube. And I just finished a film related to snow: it's about a park in Rio called Praça Paris, a kind of French garden, obsessed with order and symmetry, except that in Rio it doesn't work because it's made with local plants that don't accept these rigid designs [*Gloria*, 2008]. This garden goes wild. I originally had another film in mind. The one I didn't do involved an encounter between Oscar Niemeyer and Manoel de Oliveira. Both are around a hundred years old, and both speak Portuguese. Oliveira even had a house made by an architect who worked with Niemeyer. So I

tried to imagine them both having a conversation on a bench in the park, which they would like or dislike for different reasons. But the film was impossible to make, so I thought of another film where it suddenly started to snow in that tropical garden. This is the film I've just completed, with strange snow that isn't real snow; it's more like the snow of thinking, the snow of a hundred years, and the snow where Walser lay dying. I never thought I could become obsessed by snow. The relationship between the body in the snow and the writing on the sheet of paper. There's something in that.

It's interesting that you mention Niemeyer and de Oliveira, because I've interviewed both of them. With Niemeyer it was very special, because he refused to speak in French. He only spoke to me in Portuguese, so I had no idea what he was saying and had to guess what my next question would be. I didn't find out what he had said until a month later, when I read the translation. Obviously, it was completely non-linear, almost like a new kind of interview.

DG-F: [Laughs] And de Oliveira? What was the interview with him like?

It was magical. I should email both interviews to you. Maybe we could find some way to do this dialogue between Niemeyer and de Oliveira after all.

DG-F: I no longer think it would be a very good film, but I'm still fascinated by the idea of doing something with the conversation.

Let's talk about our long-term exhibition project. It's probably our most important, yet unrealized project. Or, rather, not unrealized, but still in incubation. Let's talk about the rules of the game for this project.

DG-F: I remember it started when we were discussing Münster and how the Skulptur Projekte there only take place every ten years. That got us talking about the Dogon people and their Sigui celebration, which happens once

every sixty years. Jean Rouch filmed them in the late 60s. So we were thinking how interesting it would be to work on an exhibition with this kind of time span, this kind of scale. The thinking and working processes would be on a completely different plane.

Maybe it's related to this obsession with age.

DG-F: Yes, exactly. I think this fifty-year, hundred-year exhibition should be informed by a long process, by endless practice. It should be reversed in that sense, and it should also include all of these possible silences. But this goes back to the very first question in the interview: what does thinking become when we're in a slower mode? You know, while I was rereading the other interviews, I also read your book *dontstop*. It was great because I was able to imagine myself going through the hotel in Gais again, going through all those rooms and spaces and possibilities of all your exhibitions, kitchen, hotel room, architect house ... It gave me a lot of ideas for the long-term exhibition project. It's similar to when I was rereading this book by Enrique Vila-Matas, *Paris ne finit jamais*, and I came across those pages again where he writes about Edgardo Cozarinsky, and about how meeting Cozarinsky helped him discover Borges. It just so happens that we met Cozarinsky and we met Vila-Matas. There's a better word for that than coincidence.

It's almost telepathic.

DG-F: It's also what happened to Walser when his nephew arrived in the restaurant. Then we have Vila-Matas, who is so obsessed with Walser, and who also met Cozarinsky. Perhaps it's telepathy. But what does Sheldrake call it?

Rupert Sheldrake calls it a 'morphogenetic field'. Vila-Matas, Cozarinsky, you, and I – we're all in the same morphogenetic field.

DG-F: That's exactly the phrase I was looking for, because there are all these strange connections: there's the snow, and because of the snow there's the

Maison de la Culture – this architecture in Grenoble made by Wogenscky. And then because of this strange egg-shaped structure, I became fascinated with modern architecture, went to Brasília, and got tropicalized, all of which brings us back to the snow.

We haven't really spoken yet about your project in Münster, which revisited the previous exhibitions there. It was very much a timeline.

DG-F: The context of the work was both the city and the previous exhibitions that had been held there. And for me, since I visited this exhibition – for the first time in '87 and then again in '97 – it was impossible to ignore these dimensions. I felt the need to take this aspect of time, and these works that had been created for the exhibitions over time, and to quote them. Münster is really an exhibition in time and space. I was interested in these layers of time and how they would allow me to take a different approach to art. It was like writing a novel, where it's possible to bring different spaces and places and people together. The latest exhibition was a chance for me to write a kind of text in space, a visual text that would tell a story. That's why I called it *Roman de Münster* [2007]. And this brings me to another point, which I feel also comes through in the interviews: the connection between space and text. I think there's a constant to and fro between the two: some texts produce space, and some spaces produce text. It would be interesting to see whether we could produce a kind of space, or relation to space, with this book. Maybe this could become the fifty- or hundred-year exhibition we just spoke about. At any rate, I have the feeling that the connection between text and space is why I'm so fascinated by architecture and literature – by the moments when literature produces architecture and vice versa. Maybe this is what fascinated Borges, too, because many of his texts produce incredible spaces.

One of the things we've always discussed in our conversations is the production of reality, and, in many instances, these conversations themselves have produced reality. So I think your idea that our fifty-year project could grow out of this conversation

is entirely plausible. But one thing I feel strongly about is that the project shouldn't be a heavy, large-scale event. It should be kept very light, almost like a conversation.

DG-F: Yes, it should be related in some way to a book – a new type of book, one that produces space. I feel it's important that we start collecting material and ideas soon. It's very urgent that we give it a beginning.

Since we're on the topic of large spans of time, I'd like to ask you about your relationship to the history of public sculpture. I remember that at some point before Münster, you were working in Grenoble on a Marta Pan project, revisiting the 50s – obviously a very different moment in the history of public sculpture. But Münster started in the 70s, with Joseph Beuys, Michael Asher, Claes Oldenburg, Donald Judd and others. How do you view this time period?

DG-F: I think it's important to look at a longer period than just fifty years. The more research I do on sculpture in outdoor space, the more I think that Noguchi is the one who took some of the strangest and most interesting steps.

We've never spoken about Noguchi.

DG-F: I'm fond of the diversity of his approach, but also its openness. In those respects, he reminds me a lot of Philippe Parreno.

How did you meet Philippe?

DG-F: We went to the same art school in Grenoble.

That must have been about twenty years ago.

DG-F: I think it was around 1985. Pierre Joseph was there, too. It's also when we started to work together. Two weeks ago, I spent the whole afternoon with Philippe. He showed me a DVD and I showed him some books and we talked and talked. When I left, I realized just how precious my twenty-year-long conversation with him has been. I'm interested in content that is both

fixed and evolving, as is the case, for example, with Enrique Vila-Matas. It's a conversation that started with his books, which I read one by one, and now it's continuing with our real conversations, each with a pause of one year, six months, three days. It's an interesting kind of structure.

It's what Maurice Blanchot referred to as an 'infinite conversation'. You know, I'm thrilled that my interviews with you and my interviews with Philippe [Parreno] will be published more or less at the same time. In both cases, the dialogues were so intense that they jumped to trialogues. It also happened with Pierre Huyghe when we visited Claude Parent and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and it happened with Rem Koolhaas, too. All of a sudden we found ourselves travelling around visiting his mentors: Oswald Mathias Ungers, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Philip Johnson. And with Philippe, we suddenly decided to visit Jaron Lanier, the inventor of virtual reality, and also Pierre Boulez, with whom we had a whole discussion about polyphony.

DG-F: Yes, that's why the conversation is somehow a tropical thing, the way it grows. You're right: it goes beyond the dialogue to become an open field.

The question of beginnings is also very interesting. You could say that I was born in 1985/86 at the age of seventeen or eighteen in the studio of Fischli/Weiss [artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss], who have also played a key role in your development. The work I saw there on quiet afternoons changed my life. What is your relationship to them?

DG-F: I've been asked to write something about them, and about my favourite work by them. But I think it's impossible to narrow it down to one work, because what they've accomplished needs to be viewed in broad terms. I've also tried to write something that's very funny. Thanks to Fischli/Weiss, I discovered that laughing is another dimension to art: that laughing can be very productive, bringing new ideas or going against certain aspects of art that I dislike.

They were very involved in an exhibition you did at the Kunsthalle in Zurich.

DG-F: I was attempting to find a relationship to the place and, just as it did in Münster, the entire context became this story of the exhibition and the exhibition of the story. I realized that the main connection I had to Zurich was their presence there. It was as if there were no other reality than this one – as if the building or the museum or the space itself weren't enough of a reality. We had these fantastic conversations beforehand in Venice and in Japan, so I asked them if they would like to curate the exhibition. The only way for me to make it necessary and interesting was to work and talk with them and turn it into a moment we would modify and produce together.

It's also interesting that Rat and Bear by Fischli/Weiss played a role there, just popping up in a vitrine. The same vitrine was also part of the exhibition in Milano in Palazzo Litta ['Altri fiori e altre domande', 2008], which inspired Fischli/Weiss to bring Rat and Bear back to life and to start a new film. In your exhibition in Zurich, the two characters were like guests.

DG-F: The exhibition was called 'Multiverse' [Kunsthalle Zürich, 2004] and was very science-fiction oriented. I really wanted these two characters to be in the exhibition, but of course Peter and David were not keen on walking around the whole time dressed as Rat and Bear. So they came up with this incredible idea of freezing the characters in dark vitrines, similar to the black monolith in Kubrick's *2001*. It gave them this eternal presence. I'm so happy that Rat and Bear have been brought back to life in this new film.

We haven't spoken enough about the early encounter between you and Philippe and Pierre Joseph. I think it's very important for many reasons: for one, because it was the beginning of your long-term conversion with both of them, but also because it was a very magical moment in Grenoble, so different from now when we no longer have really interesting art schools in Europe. Can you tell

me more about how these dialogues worked, and about the context in the art school in Grenoble?

DG-F: I've always said it wouldn't have happened the same way in Bordeaux or in a city that wasn't such a laboratory of science and politics. Art history was not our only context or reference at the time. Scientific magazines or cartoons or a David Lynch film – these references were just as important as the art context. That's perhaps what I remember the most: the magazines, the films, the conversations, the scientists we invited to the school. Those were the starting points.

When did you collaborate for the first time with each other? Were you already collaborating during those very early student days?

DG-F: At the time, there were some group exhibitions at the school, and that's when we started to look at each other's work. But I think the true collaboration didn't begin until the last year there, when we started to work on the Siberia and Ozone project together [Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Corse, 1990]. This is also when I came to the conclusion that you can be a curator and an artist at the same time, without being obsessed with a particular signature, or style. Working on a project with two or three other people and focusing on the relationship between text and space produces a different type of work. Taking this approach was, I think, very deviant. This was probably in '86 or '87, when we felt there was an obvious need to generate a different kind of work and relationship to art. There was a need to go beyond the self and the author and the signature. So we would give the work a title and then there would be a different geometry around it. We continued with this approach – this variable geometry – all through the 90s. It was an ongoing conversation that materialized in works like *Permanent Food* with Maurizio [Cattelan],^{*} or *Purple* with Elein [Fleiss] and Olivier [Zahm],[†] or the exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris with Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno and 'the narrator'.

Can you tell me more about the Ozone project?

DG-F: At the moment, we've entered a phase where you can't open the newspaper without reading an article on climate change and ecology. But in the laboratory of Grenoble, ecology has always been present. The 70s were a very ecological time; it was one of the main topics, and the ecological consciousness was very strong for many reasons. The Ozone project was not radical or militant in any way. It dealt with different aspects of the issue, with information and representation, but it avoided summing things up in a simple slogan.

Speaking of beginnings, one thing we haven't talked about yet is how another essential dialogue started, the one with Pierre Huyghe. Did you meet Pierre Huyghe in Paris? Because you moved from Grenoble to Paris, and the other day I read that fascinating transcription from an interview conducted at the school founded by Pontus Hultén, Daniel Buren, Serge Fauchereau and Sarkis [Zabunyan]: the Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques. There's an interesting exchange between you and Michael Asher.

DG-F: Yes, I remember that day well. I was describing a project I had been working on and Michael Asher asked me a number of fantastic questions. You know, I think the idea to create this institute involved incredible intuition, because it led to so many inspiring moments – for example, when Pontus took us to visit Teeny Duchamp in Milly-la-Fôret. The institute connected in a very live way to art history; for Pontus all art was alive, full of stories and projects. But Pierre [Huyghe] wasn't at the institute. We met him around that time, though, and I remember that our first conversations were very long. Sometimes we'd talk for five hours without interruption. Pierre has an incredible ability to work through dialogue – to make works appear, and to test them. Sometimes I think art and conversation are a work, one and the same.

ELAINE STURTEVANT

In 1992 I travelled to Stuttgart to see one of Elaine Sturtevant's first survey shows. Best known for the repetition of works by other artists, including Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sturtevant questioned notions of authenticity, authorship, originality and representation. She made her controversial artistic debut in 1965 when she replicated Andy Warhol's flower paintings, just months after their initial presentation. Despite early hostility to Sturtevant's work and ideas, her influence has grown significantly over the past two decades. Many now regard her as one of the most important artists of the twenty-first century, realizing that she presaged the world we live in today with its deluge of unattributed information and endlessly repeating imagery. Since 2000 Sturtevant embraced film and video, advertising and internet-based images, producing work that reflects the fragmented and pervasive nature of our image-saturated culture.

She had a very strong desire to share her thinking, an energy that was with her until she died. Her unrealized project on a Spinoza opera was the subject of our last conversation. Chance plays a big role in these dialogues, and sadly we never had another opportunity to record a longer conversation.

Simulacra, Spinoza and sound

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *Elaine, you wanted to talk today, above all, about Spinoza, and about simulacra, as well as to show us two films.*

Elaine, the film we saw at the beginning, Stupidity [2003], is actually the film you don't want to talk about today, but nevertheless maybe you could say a few words about what we saw when we came in?

ELAINE STURTEVANT: Well, I think it's such fun to play a video that you're not going to talk about. Basically my head's not into *Stupidity* right at this moment. But what's interesting about it is it's very difficult to put it into any kind of conceptual framework, and most people will laugh when you say, 'I'm going to give a talk on "stupidity",' so I don't know what that is. I did form some conceptual ideas from *Stupidity*, and it's a very interesting subject, but we won't go into it today, OK? Let's talk about something else.

Yes, let's talk about Spinoza. This summer I visited you at your apartment on the hottest day of the year – it was something like forty-two degrees, I think it was some kind of record – and you were reading Improvement of the Understanding: Ethics and Correspondence of Spinoza. So this was the summer of Spinoza for you, although it was obviously not the first time you had read the book.

ES: Yes, you don't think so?! [*Laughs*] Well, I would hate to try anything after reading it for the first time. I think I encountered it the first time in college, and Spinoza just drove me crazy because he has this very difficult, rigid logic, and logic is my least favourite subject. And Descartes I considered the worst thing that could happen to us! Spinoza also has this

ability – he gives you something and he takes it away. So all these things drove me crazy when I was in college, but then I would pick him up from time to time. What I could never understand was why people said he was so ... What did they say? Oh, ‘So brilliant!’ I mean, you have Deleuze, you have Foucault – all of these people saying, ‘Oh, he’s so excellent; great.’ I don’t see him as being brilliant! I see him as being very repetitive, although then of course I found out that one of the reasons he’s a bit repetitive is that he wrote *Ethics* in Latin, and his Latin was very basic. He didn’t have a large vocabulary and he was not very apt at it, I think this comes from the repetition of known words. And to show his arrogance, he says things that are rude. Because he is a very arrogant guy. God, the other day I was reading his *Ethics* again, I used to hate the way he’d contradict himself, constantly.

Yes, he embraced contradiction; it was like a game.

ES: He’s always contradicting himself, and I’m not absolutely sure he knows he’s contradicting himself, which is the problem! I thought maybe I’d have to scratch out all these sentences that are contradictory ... But then again I thought that would probably be half the book!

The book was fascinating to look at because it was full of your notes, and you had really been working through it.

ES: I put stuff all over the book, I write it in. You know, if he says one more time ‘Substance is Essence’ I feel like I want to strangle him! And then I find that if you use substance as your support system, which he says is obvious, then he says that clearly by its substance it has to be true or it has to be ... Get outta here! This premise on substance is not that great, you know.

No, I understand. So that’s complex.

ES: But yes, I’d like to do a Spinoza opera, which is an incredible challenge. Normally the conflict in an opera comes from male/female relationships, and we don’t have this; Spinoza was not particularly interested in females,

and once he was excommunicated from the Jewish community, women would have nothing to do with him, which I don't think bothered him at all. He's very busy eating his grits and gruels.

I started there, and then I had decided that after my show at [Galerie] Thaddaeus Ropac [in Paris], I'm going to sit down and write *Spinoza* because it's a change, and I think it's a good point for me to switch to something else. I started working on this because Hans Ulrich fortunately has found me someone to back this up with music, and stage direction, and all those thousand-and-one things you need for an opera. The only thing I'm doing is writing a libretto. And I decided to write a trailer for the opera to develop my ideas – I have an idea of how the stage direction should be, and I have an idea of how the music should be, but I can't do it, so I decided to write a trailer to try and get some idea. I wondered what the major conflict would be? And I decided the major conflict would be thinking as an object of conflict. So when I started writing then ... you say, 'How the hell are you going to do that?!' And then when I started to write, I could see how that could start. But I haven't worked on it very much since because I've been very busy with my show in Thaddaeus Ropac, and then I might do a show with Beatrix Ruf – who we're very honoured to have here tonight – at the Kunsthalle in Zurich, and then I will go gung-ho for the opera.

It all started with me asking you, 'What are your unrealized projects?' and now we're going to make your big unrealized project happen.

In terms of Spinoza and sound, I was so intrigued to see, when you showed me your incredible annotated copy of the book, that it contains an inscription referring to a rap song. It says, 'When I move, you move, just like that.'

ES: It's Ludacris. 'When I move, you move, just like that'; it's a wonderful song. Doesn't anybody here know it? That's right, you guys don't know anything about music here! *[Laughter]*

Oh, there's my friend Gavin! Hi, Gavin! OK, so it's Ludacris, yes.

What can you tell us about the sound of this opera? You were thinking in the beginning that there would be a composer.

ES: Oh, there's no way I can do that! I certainly know how I want it to sound. Unfortunately Spinoza's not a very big man, because I'd like to make him a very deep bass, you know? But he's not, so I'll put him one level up from the bass because I'd really like him, [*in a very low voice*] 'ber ber ber', but I'm afraid he can't be that way. So we'll see how it goes. It should be interesting.

When we spoke about Spinoza this summer you mentioned something which really struck me: about a moment of sound which would be a kind of an anxiety, like a murmur in the marketplace. I thought it would be great if you could tell us a bit more about that sound?

ES: Well, what you want to do is start building up a lot of anxiety. There's a chorus there – not a real Greek chorus, but a chorus – and we have Spinoza speaking, but he's speaking in the future. Then we go back and he's in the marketplace, and in the marketplace we hear this kind of very low murmur. I don't know how in the hell we're going to do that, but it will be crucial to immediately convey anxiety. And then we cut and go back.

You also told me that you wanted to make this idea that he was out of the community somehow more dramatic, and you felt that could be achieved by taking him into action that has not yet occurred, maybe going back to past action?

ES: Well, he was a pretty arrogant guy, you know, and he was not at all afraid, he said he had absolutely no fear.

But I think that's enough of Spinoza, these people are not looking terribly interested in Spinoza. I can't imagine why! [*Laughter*]

I think it's exciting, and it's urgent to reread Spinoza, so I think it's good we're persistent!

UNKNOWN: Can you tell us about your Deleuze piece?

ES: Oh, the *Deleuze Abécédaire*. So where shall I begin with that?

Deleuze loved Spinoza, so there is a first connection!

ES: Originally I decided I would take some of the top critics and museum people – no artists and no gallery dealers – and invent them talking as Deleuze did, because as you know Deleuze in his discourse was absolutely incredible. I mean, he could talk endlessly. Kathryn would say, ‘OK, “D”’, and he’d start out with, ‘Oh, D for dog, the most ridiculous sound barking they make’, and then he’d go on and on and on, but he’s incredible.

So I put major critics, museum people, powers that be, in the chair where Deleuze was, and they could start with their first or last initial and then talk. We had three different monitors, each monitor has four people; I did a total of twelve people, I think, but we made the mistake of filming them for way too long. We thought we’d put them on a tape of thirty to forty minutes so we spent hours in post-production editing, and that’s ... phew!

But then when I was being interviewed one time someone said, ‘So if they gave you the name, if they asked you what you would start with, what would you start with?’ And I said, ‘Well, I’m very happy my name isn’t “A” because I’d say the world is full of assholes, and I don’t think that’s a good way to start a conversation!’ But then they realized also that there’s a limitation, you know? Because your name has a lot hanging over it, identities and stuff, so ... I’m not so sure. But the whole motivation was really about the power of language and the power of words.

U: *Why didn’t you take any artists in the piece?*

ES: Should I really tell you?!

U: *Yes!*

ES: I have enough enemies, never mind making any more! Because artists usually don’t have very clearly defined ideas in most cases. Can I say that? Well, I said it. No, they don’t, whereas critics and museum directors have a certain clarity about where they’re going and what they’re doing. Artists have to be a little bit more all over the place. They have very limited

perspective really, and the way art is today subjective it's practically non-existent, so ... yes. Do you have any other interesting questions?

[Audience laugh]

No, that's good.

The other day, I was speaking to a scientist, and he was telling me that in science you can always locate 'the discovery'. You can say, for instance, that on a sunny Wednesday, Benoît Mandelbrot discovered fractals. When I read about your invention of repeating works, I wondered if you remember the day when you first had this idea.

ES: Well, of course it wasn't a day because it was a very slow evolution of thinking. I spent a year just drawing and it was so beautiful. I was doing that just to try to clarify where the thinking was going and what its dimensions were and things like that. It wasn't like, 'Oh, bingo, that's it!'

So it grew out of the drawing?

ES: Yes, really out of the drawing, which is thinking.

At that time you didn't know Deleuze, but in an almost telepathic way you had the same thinking as he did. I read his book about repetition and difference when I was a student. It is very connected to what you do.

ES: He wasn't even translated at the time I started making those works.

Yes, so completely independently you developed parallel lines of thought. Did you ever meet Deleuze?

ES: Well, of course I never met Deleuze, because actually someone who studied under him was going to introduce me, but then poor Deleuze committed suicide, poor man. At the time, I was supporting work with my own ideas of what repetition was and what it consisted of, and so then Deleuze and Foucault of course created a very firm base with their theories of repetition. I guess repetition is difference, repetition expands limitations,

repetition is ... repetition is interior movement, and so forth and so on, so it's a very potent kind of concept. Gee, you all look very convinced!

Neither Foucault nor Deleuze were translated into English at that time. I had a show at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, in 1973, which was a beautiful show, but the critics said the same dumb things: 'No, this is a copy.' That's when I thought, 'I gotta get outta here.' Because otherwise that's what it *will* become, because if they reiterate that enough, it will indeed become a copy. So that's when I stopped making work and played tennis. When I went back, of course, the idea had not been eliminated from my head; it was like a half-fire in my head ...

... that kept burning.

ES: It was a good thing that I left because if someone keeps repeating something, then people come to believe it. And the critics were just not capable of saying anything else. There were no references to this at all, so with no references they were really not to be blamed. But they certainly did like to hassle me.

It's so interesting that completely independently of Deleuze you had a similar intuition, and that now you do the project with Deleuze.

ES: Everyone says, 'Oh, everyone knows Deleuze' – because I say I'm doing a project with Deleuze – 'Everyone knows Deleuze.' And then it turns out, they know Gilles Deleuze but they don't know *Deleuze*.

No, they don't. That's what Godard always says, that every customs officer knows him, but no one saw the movies. Deleuze wrote Difference and Repetition in 1968 and you did it in 1965. So you were actually ahead of the game.

ES: Oh, is that true? He wrote it in 1968? That's great, I didn't know that. Well, one summer when I was in Cambridge I went up to New Hampshire and I sat there and read *Difference and Repetition* in French. And, of course, later it was translated and I got it in English and realized that it was

a whole different book! It is a very difficult book. I mean, it has brilliant moments but I think some of it is a little bit ... ?

Some is impenetrable.

ES: Not only impenetrable but also a little not quite right, you know? But anyway he wrote it and this is what counts.

It's interesting to note that the Deleuze book came after your landmark, legendary exhibition where you repeated works of other artists for the first time [In 1965, at the Bianchini Gallery, New York]. So I was wondering if you could tell us about your epiphany, or what it was that prompted you in 1965 to this idea of repetition and difference, even before you read Deleuze?

ES: Well, it certainly was not a pop-up idea. I have a background in Nietzsche, and Hegel, and Spinoza, and Schopenhauer, and all those funny guys. In New York at that time the abstract expressionists and the pop artists were very, very popular – the abstract expressionists were all emotion on the surface, and the pop artists were about mass culture; this would of course trigger me into thinking about what the under-structure of art is. What is the power, the silent power, of art? So I started thinking about that, and then, after a long period of thinking, I realized this would be a way of doing it. It seems so simple, but I had to really rethink it to make sure that it was correct and valid. It's always the simplest ideas that are somehow the most difficult to grasp.

And then there were many years of this practice, and you told me that in 1973 you had an exhibition at Everson which was called 'Studies for Warhol's Marilyns, Beuys' Action and Objects, and Duchamp[']s Etc.], Including Film'. Can you tell us about how film entered your practice?

ES: Those were very early films: the Warhol *Empire* and the Duchamp *Nu descendant un escalier* and [Joseph] Beuys. I think of that as very separate from what I went into. Once I'd decided that I wanted to start talking about

articulating visibilities, you have to create action, so you need film. You can't do that with still, static images. So this is how I went into film. The first video I did was *Dillinger Running Series* [2000], while I was at Harvard.

That was the first video?

ES: That was my first. Not bad.

But you have always spoken of moving images and the one filmmaker that you have mentioned most is John Waters ...

ES: Well, I don't mention him that much, but it's very funny! John and I are friends. I did a piece for my show in Stockholm ['Image over Image,' 2012], which I love. And he said to me, 'Well, that certainly is image over image', and I said, 'Oh my God, I never thought of that, that's great, of course it's image over image!' John and I are doing a talk in October at Frieze.

Yes, and there is a poem you did for John Waters. 'I want to meet John Waters every Friday at cocktail hour so we can talk about why he likes criminals!'

ES: [*Laughs*] Sometimes, when I do things he goes crazy, you know, he says, 'Arghh blah blah blah duh duh!' and I just let him go and then he calms down and he says, 'Yeah, OK, that's a good idea.' But he works like crazy.

We're doing a talk at Frieze and I said, 'Oh, I'm a little worried', and someone said, 'Why should you be worried? John's very good at that, he knows what to do.' And I said, 'That's why I'm worried!' Then you do the talk on stupidity, and you know that most people laugh when you talk about that, and of course then they're thinking of *things* that are stupid, not stupidity. Putting stupidity into a conceptual frame is almost impossible. We're going to put it into a conceptual frame.

It's also a philosophical endeavour?

ES: Well, I do like challenge.

We're going to talk more about these more recent films later in the conversation, but staying with repetition for now. This weekend I was with John Berger, the English writer, novelist and art critic, who wrote a book on Spinoza's sketches, a kind of lost notebook, and talked a lot about this idea of repetition and drawing.

To quote Berger: 'The mind, both in so far as it has both clear and distinct and confused ideas, endeavours to persist in its being for an indefinite period, and of this endeavour it is conscious.'

So John Berger talking about Spinoza and drawing has prompted me to ask you about your drawings, which is something we've never spoken about. Anyway, I'm very curious to know about your drawings.

ES: Drawings. Well, when I first started, I would basically just work in the studio all by myself – very tranquil, very quiet, very nice. The art world was out there somewhere, but you know drawing was really a way for me to refine my thinking about repetition, so I spent one year drawing and it's an incredible thing to do, it's wonderful, isn't it? And if you consistently draw, it's miraculous how you can get the graphite pencil to do anything you want it to do, it's just astounding. So I spent a year doing that and that helped me to clarify what I was doing with this repetition.

And which year was that?

ES: I'm very bad about dates.

But an entire year of drawing: have they been exhibited?

ES: Well, Muriel of MMK is trying to get it, and Gavin Brown is working on a drawing show, but it's a lot of work.

There's a question from Gavin.

GAVIN BROWN: You talk quite a lot about cybernetics, and I'm still confused about what you mean by that term and why it's important to you, and how, in the larger sense, your concern for something like cybernetics and, say, simulacra, impacts on the future – not as an art world, but as a species?

ES: Well, ‘cybernetics’ is in a way our overlord, and his sidekick is ‘digital’, and one of the most interesting things about our cybernetic world is that it has created these tremendous reversals of hierarchy, like you have information over knowledge, where knowledge used to be the higher power. You have image over object, whereas it used to be object over image, and then that of course goes into, you can get an object over object, which means the object in itself becomes its own self, its own representation, not an image, the object itself.

Man is God, instead of God is man, and truth is falsity. And *Simulacra* is certainly about our world as being polluted with truth as falsity, and that’s partially due to this great reversal of hierarchies. It’s also because it’s so imposing on your behaviour, and it leads to what I call the vast barren interior of man, and so the denial of metaphysical self. So this is cybernetics and there is concealing, but it’s very tricky, now it has moved into science, neural and bioscience, and it’s so embedded that it no longer seems concealed.

And what’s interesting now is that there is a great discourse going on between creativity and science – have any of you noticed that? There’s this great debate going on that revolves around the brain – the brain being the most powerful thing you have in your whole body, with infinite abilities to think and to engender thinking. There’s nothing wrong with your brain – but science has this great idea: it’s going to impose a lot of artificiality on to your brain, so it has things where it dreams up ... Someone’s falling asleep, this is terrible! [*Laughter*]

No, no, it’s exciting, you should tell us more about this. I think it was a very good idea that we should get into cybernetics as a topic.

ES: Yes. So they’re messing around with our brains now, and one of the things they want to do is firstly be able to read somebody else’s mind, which I think is one big nightmare. Certainly that would be a *cauchemar* [nightmare] for me, if you knew what I was really thinking, woah, I’d be in a lot of trouble!

But it's all this artificial imposition on your mind, which neural and bioscience thinks is red hot but it really isn't, because what it's substituting is the mind is losing its ability, its great power. So that's not too cool, that's really very nasty stuff, it really is, and it's ... Have any of you noticed this? Have you noticed any implants in your brains?! [Laughter] Have you noticed anyone thinking?! They say, 'Oh my God, I can hear what they're thinking – oh, woah!'

It's a very complex subject, and also I think most people don't realize the depth of what this cybernetic world is doing to you, and how barren it leaves you. I don't know how we can go back.

When I was in college, the mind was considered the biggest thing you possess, and it was something that had unlimited, infinite possibilities. Today the brain is something being manipulated, and it's something that is considered to be embedded with artificial means of thinking. This is not good, we must fight that, OK? Fight it, fight it, fight, thank you!

My late friend Cedric Price, the architect, never designed a building without bringing in a cybernetician. By the 60s, he had already said that cybernetics was key in order not to fall into a romantic notion of origin. This is something that you have said as well many times, that in a cybernetic condition there isn't this idea of an origin. In this sense that's why your work isn't a copy, that's why you strongly reject this notion of the copy – could you tell us a little bit more about that?

ES: Oh boy! Copy – oh, I've dealt with that for so many years.

For the first I-don't-know-how-many years, the work was always identified as copy, and no matter how I talked about the work it was still classified as copying. And then I had a very beautiful show at the Everson Museum in New York and the critics said the same thing, so I said, 'Well, when the mental retards catch up, I'll come back', and of course they didn't, you know, but I did come back.

Working in Paris is better for you?

ES: Oh yes, Paris is much better for me, but I have to stop working in the United States. It is still so resistant to the work.

What prompted you to come to Paris? What was the trigger?

ES: When I first came to Paris earlier for short periods of time, it was to get unglued from what I was into, and get a new focus. When I came last time, in the 90s, there was really no dialogue in New York, no dialogue at all. They were talking about landscape art and subjective art, if they were even talking about anything. So it was time to get out, and that brought me to Paris. I moved here in the 90s sometime.

Since 2000 you have expanded into doing videos and film material, so now it makes a lot of sense that the next step will be a further expansion into opera.

ES: Yes, absolutely. I mean, there really are limitations, although we don't like to think so ... Firstly, I think *Elastic Tango* [2010] was a very splendid piece. So I think maybe we can let it go with that and go into something else.

It's interesting because there are these moments, for instance in 1965, there was this legendary exhibition where you repeated works of other artists for the first time, then in the 2000s you suddenly have the videos and the films, and now your move into opera marks another landmark moment.

ES: It's true. There are threads that go all the way through from beginning to end. Someone showed me an early catalogue and it had comments I had written in it, and I had totally forgotten that I was thinking about things like that at that time. There are very long threads.

The thread which started in '65 is still going on. Wonderful. Are there any more questions for Elaine?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: I have one question. The last one; a very basic one. What is the aim now, in 2012, of art?

ES: Ah, that's a good question because I think art now is on a very fine line, and you can see it, it keeps dragging in more and more things, you can see it. Yes, it's on a very fine line.

AM1: But is it a social line? I mean, what is the aim of art?

ES: What is the aim of art? Oh my God, I have no idea! I can tell you what it used to be, like when the Metropolitan opened, the goal was to educate you, to give you more ethical feelings, and to increase your sense of humour. I mean, if we'd said to the people, 'Now you are going into this show and this is what you're going to get', they'd laugh, wouldn't they? I think art now is basically low-level entertainment. Everything is entertainment. It's on a very fine line, I think that's a good statement, and I have another statement which I promised myself I wouldn't say but I'm going to say it anyhow, which is: white man is out. I don't know how many decades this statement will hold true for but ... white man is out, so ... keep that in here.

One more question here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: You were talking about the fine line between art and entertainment, and maybe going back to Spinoza and when you did *Spinoza in Las Vegas*. I don't think you have such a literal judgement on entertainment, as entertainment you find interesting. I think you have a use for entertainment that you feel can be repeated also in your work to get into the interior structure of entertainment?

ES: Yes, but also, you know, *Spinoza in Las Vegas*, that performance is also a critique of cybernetics. It was double-layered, and that works for me. And then that's OK – every once in a while when I say, 'Oh, enough with all this', you do something that's fun, something that's a little crazy, you know, and that was great fun to do. It was Tate Modern that did it.

Last time we spoke I asked you about your unrealized project and you said this opera, which we are now making happen, so I was wondering if there are any other unrealized projects you have? Projects that have been too big to be realized, projects that are

too small to be realized, projects which are censored, or other projects in your locker?

ES: No, I don't think so. No, I appreciate working on something – when I work on something, I work on it with total concentration until the project is finished, so I never really have unrealized projects, because an unrealized project would be something I didn't want to do, so it's not unrealized is it? No.

But there are projects which you didn't do and which you no longer want to do – as you told me last time. The Double Negative of Michael Heizer is definitely something you don't want to do any more; it remained unrealized, and I was curious if you could tell us a little bit about this?

ES: That is very interesting because here you have this great project, and they ran out of money and didn't complete it. It's probably just as well – Michael Heizer probably would have killed me, so it's OK. But not to finish it, I found *that* to be such a radical idea, that you would engender something and then be very pleased that it wasn't finished, so I was very happy that I did that. I mean, I would have liked to have finished it, but can you imagine? At that time no one used to have anything to do with me, and it would have been full of sand and mud and dirt by this now.

And how would it have worked? The idea was to fold the Heizer piece back on itself, right?

ES: Well, I went to Las Vegas and stayed in a hotel, and the first thing I did was buy a new bikini because I thought I looked pretty stupid in my New York bikini! And I got an aeroplane and I found out where Michael Heizer's piece was, and then surveyed the land in the plane, thinking about what was a good place, and then went to the land office and found out what land was free, and we found a piece of land. And that's when I ran out of money.

Now we're going to conclude watching the last film, Simulacra; can you tell us about it?

ES: Yes, we're going to watch *Simulacra*. It's about truth over falsity.
That was fun.

ERNEST MANCOBA

I came across Ernest Mancoba's work when I was researching CoBrA, an avant-garde movement which was based in Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam in the late 1940s. Then I started to hear young artists speaking about him more and more often as a key influence on their thinking, although he was still not widely known. So I decided to interview him. I met him in 2002 when he was living on the outskirts of Paris in a retirement home. We had a long conversation on his art and Apartheid and South African politics that was filmed, and then published several times because it's one of the very few interviews he gave. In 2015, the footage of this interview was used by Kemang Wa Lehulere, a young artist born in Cape Town, to create a short film for an exhibition at Foundation De 11 Lijnen in Oudenberg, Belgium. The exhibition pays tribute to Marcoba and his ideas, featuring contemporary artists whose life and work parallel those of the late painter, including Julie Mehretu, Yto Barrada and Jack Whitter.

This is also part of my series of interviews with centenarians (such as Oscar Niemeyer), an idea the German artist Rosemarie Trockel has encouraged me to pursue as a protest against forgetting.

One must be absolutely modern

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *Let's begin with the beginnings. How did you become an artist in South Africa in the early years of the twentieth century?*

ERNEST MANCOBA: I was born a black miner's son in 1904 in Turffontein, along the goldfields of the Reef near Johannesburg. My mother very much influenced what I later became, even though she was not an artist herself. But she went out at times with other women of her age group, as was the custom, to make (with clay, in a collective oven, built with branches of wood) the earthenware pots which we used at home. I remember that she told me about the origins of my clan among the Fingo people. They were originally Zulus who had emigrated under persecution for opposing the military conquest of other tribes by King Shaka, which they considered contrary to the African tradition of democratic kingship, though it might have been justified to unite our nations against the colonial invasion. They had taken refuge among the Xhosas – *fin*go means 'wanderer'. She taught me *Ubuntu*, the African 'philosophy' of human brotherhood, but she was at the same time a fervent Christian. She used to read us poetry aloud – African poetry from an old book wrapped in a piece of cloth – and she explained the importance of poetry, especially the notion of expressing the 'unspeakable'.

What were your first works like?

EM: I had never received any formal art training as such. During my school years, my vocation started at Grace-Dieu, the Anglican Teachers Training College near Pietersburg, where I learned the technique of sculpting in wood from a nun, Sister Pauline. I made altar fronts and other pieces of church furniture. I became a teacher thereafter. But by then I already knew

that I wanted to become, one day, a full-time artist. At that moment what I was doing was mainly woodcarving that was both inspired by and struggling with the European style, trying to make it my own. One of my religious carvings, *Bantu Madonna* (1929), for which an African girl, one of my fellow students, had posed, even got a fine reception. It didn't interrupt my studies though, and after Pietersburg, I went to the University of Fort Hare in Alice, a little town in the Eastern Cape. Fort Hare had only just received university status; before that it had been known as the South African Native College. Religion and a certain form of humanism were at the heart of the institution; it was a tradition shared by the 'black elite' (as they were expected to become) and by the white liberals, many of whom belonged to the clergy. Unlike the Bantu education later implemented in South Africa from the 50s, Fort Hare was not based on the assumption that black Africans require and deserve a different, inferior kind of education.

The history of the African intelligentsia is inextricably linked to the University of Fort Hare ...

EM: Absolutely. It's in Fort Hare that political activists, like Nelson Mandela, my friends Govan Mbeki, Isaac [Bangani] Tabata and Jane Gool or poets like Dennis Brutus or, later on, Can Themba, the *Drum* journalist, received their higher education.

Were there a lot of students training in art in Fort Hare?

EM: In Fort Hare, I did not study art – there was no such thing – my subjects were English, history, mathematics, psychology and biology. And like many black students then, I was also thinking about becoming a journalist.

Did you have 'dialogues' about art and the role of art in South Africa there nevertheless?

EM: When I was in Pietersburg, I became friendly with Gerard Sekoto, who later became an important painter, and Thomas Masekela, who, though he was to dedicate his later life to an organization of hospitals for our people, worked privately with sculpture. We had a constant dialogue, and also,

together with other African students and young teachers, like Nimrod Ndebele, another close friend, we organized theatrical representations at the school, and discussed the future of the arts in South Africa. At Fort Hare, where I was head of the debating society, we rarely spoke about art as such. When I came to Cape Town, on a cargo ship from Port Elizabeth, the most intense conversations that I had on the subject were probably the ones with Lippy Lipschitz, whom I often visited in his studio. Mine was in 'District Six', the ghetto for coloured people. Lippy was a sculptor who had emigrated from Eastern Europe. He introduced me to another South African sculptor, also of European origin, Elza Dziomba, whose studio in Johannesburg I entered by the back door, pretending to be the service boy, as it was situated in an area for 'whites only'. It was also Lipschitz who told me about the growing interest in Europe for African art, and about the influence it had had at the beginning of the twentieth century. Paul Guillaume's book *Primitive Negro Sculpture* [*La Sculpture nègre primitive*, with Thomas Munro, 1929] was at the heart of those discussions. I remember that on Lippy's advice I had gone to the National Library in Cape Town, to read that very book. People there could hardly understand it, that a black man could have had anything to do in the place. Even less so that he should have been asking for such a recent French author. But I argued and finally had the chance to sit down and read the book, which they kindly brought me. While absorbing what I found in it – which astonished me very much – I began to think about how enriching it would be to have an exchange of ideas with such an open mind, who spoke with deep respect about the expression of Africans ... when I wasn't even considered a full human being in my own country.

So you decided to leave South Africa. It was 1938. How did you decide that it was time to leave? Did you see Paris as a place of freedom, politically and artistically?

EM: The first reason for my leaving South Africa was probably when I understood that I would not be able to become either a citizen or an artist in the land of my fathers, especially after a meeting I had with the

Commissioner for Native Affairs in Pretoria. After seeing some of my works reproduced in a newspaper – the *Star*, I think it was – he decided that I should take part in the upcoming ‘Empire Exhibition’ [Johannesburg, 1936]. The idea was first to show visitors the production of folkloric art by natives, and then to develop a whole indigenous art trade by selling all sorts of pseudo-tribal figures for tourists. He offered me a good job with a fine salary; to assemble young Africans to provide for this kind of traffic. I was shocked and, as politely as possible, refused the proposition. In my daily life, I felt more and more humiliated at the conditions imposed on my people; and I had a growing difficulty in containing myself on certain occasions. Thus, I soon understood I would never be able to feel free enough, in my mind, to express myself as fully as I wished, but would always knock my head against the barriers which the colonial order had set up in my country.

And at the time, apartheid wasn't instituted as a wholly legal coercive system?

EM: It came only after the Second World War, but it had indeed existed ever since the European colonists decided, with full support of the metropolis, to exploit the black Africans in a system of near-slavery for the purely economic reasons of gold and diamonds. I felt I had no time to lose with the petty vexations, the daily wrongs that the indigenous man had to put up with. Moreover, there was, at the time, basically no public to receive what I had to express. Several of my works have disappeared, probably because those who had them in hand at the time did not consider them worth preserving. Even some of my political friends told me that artistic activity was not the most urgent thing to concentrate upon, while our people were undergoing such a terrible plight. I believed, on the contrary, that art was precisely the means to favour a greater consciousness in Man, which for me is part of the struggle for any human liberation, and without which any practical achievement would probably, sooner or later, deviate and miss its point. Therefore, making art, I thought, was as urgent as working for the political revolution, which anyhow seemed a still faraway prospect. So I

decided to engage upon a debate with European artists, by coming to Europe.

But could you leave just like that?

EM: As I had absolutely no means to travel, I had the good fortune to be helped by missionary institutions, and when I arrived in London, I lived with Bishop Smythe, whom I had known as the head of my student hostel at Fort Hare. I naturally visited the British Museum, the National Gallery and other institutions of art. But my goal was Paris, for all that the city represented, as a centre of artistic concern and responsibility, unique in the world. During these years, you could come and, almost from one day to the next, enter into a universal debate about the political, cultural and spiritual destiny of mankind. Even if you did not join any group, and might, at times, feel isolated as an artist – indeed many have died there, in loneliness and poverty – you were at least given the minimum respect to breathe as an individual, and had the full freedom to create in a town that was open to the winds of the world.

In South Africa, I had not been able to find anyone with whom to discuss the work, apart from a traditional carver from the noble tribe, one or two schoolfellows and the few immigrant artists I have mentioned, who themselves encouraged me to go to Europe. Moreover, certain words of my mother were ringing in my head. When I was a little boy, I had wept because I wanted someone to play with, and asked her for a brother. But she answered, ‘Do not weep, Ernest. Your brothers – you’ll find them in the greater world.’ So now, I was going away to try to find them – in my fellow artists.

And it happened when you arrived in Paris?

EM: I took the ship from Cape Town. When I arrived in London, I remember that, out of solidarity, I had dressed up as a worker with a cap, but when I crossed certain poor areas, children stared and soon followed me through the streets, singing, ‘Nigger, Nigger, go to hell. English, English, ring the bell!’ But I had already decided not to stay, for Paris had always been the

destination. Through Bishop Smythe's connections in Paris, I got into the École des Arts Décoratifs, rue d'Ulm. In fact, the students and the staff there had been told that an Englishman from London would arrive the following day. So they were not a little astonished when they saw me.

Was it at the École des Arts Décoratifs that you met the group of Danish artists with whom you worked closely afterwards?

EM: Yes, at the art school I met Christian Poulsen. He was studying sculpture at the time, but later became a famous ceramicist. He told me he was connected to a group of young Danish surrealists, and invited me to follow him to one of their studios. Thus, I first met Ejler Bille, who was very interested in African art, as were all the other members of the group. So he told me that I would surely be glad to speak with one of his comrades. She was a woman who had also been a member of the 'Linien' group, together with Richard Mortensen and others. That is how I saw, for the first time, Sonja Ferlov, who was to become my lifetime comrade and spouse. She came from a bourgeois family in Copenhagen. And she happened to have been very familiar with African expression from early childhood, because her parents had a friend who was the greatest collector and connoisseur of African art, Carl Kjersmeier. So, as a little girl, instead of dolls, she had been sitting with African masks and sculptures on her knees. This had developed in her an intimacy, a feeling for African sculpture – but also for Oceanic and Mexican expression as well – that was unique. I know not which kind of destiny had brought me into the presence of the ideal person. And also the right group of artists, for a fruitful dialogue and collaboration. They were very interested to know more about the continent that had produced the objects they so admired. Only a few, though, wished to hear more about the actual conditions of the people in South Africa. But they appreciated my work, so I became more and more integrated in to the group, and I could have many conversations with them, especially about the creations we had seen in the studios, the galleries and the museums we visited regularly.

You arrived in Paris only a few years after two other famous immigrants had arrived, one from Martinique, who was Aimé Césaire, the other from Dakar, Léopold Sédar Senghor. It was the beginning of 'négritude'. Did you meet them then?

EM: In fact, strangely enough, I could well have met them, because the School of Decorative Arts was situated on the rue d'Ulm, in the same street as Césaire's school, l'École Normale Supérieure [Higher Teacher Training College]. But the occasion of an encounter with these two great personalities was not given to me. Césaire and Senghor both belonged to the French-speaking colonies or territories, and were part of other circles. Personally, it took me some time to learn the language; the Danes spoke almost fluent English, which made it easier for me. I suppose I would have managed to understand Césaire and Senghor. But we might have had some disagreements also, because the problem with their approach was that I never believed, for my part, that the racist ideology of the Occident is a problem of defective reason or insufficient comprehension. And I do not think, therefore, that it can be treated by forming new ideological concepts, like 'négritude', any more than I would imagine that the humanity of the white man might rely upon any virtual concept of 'blanchitude'. For you will never prove or disprove the truth of our common humanity, any more than a child needs material evidence to instinctively know that his mother is his mother. No scientific or moral demonstration, no genetic test, nor any ethical imperative will ever add to this simple recognition, identification and love. I made a sculpture on this fundamental relationship between mother and child [*Faith*, 1936].

'Négritude' was part of an anti-colonial struggle strategy ...

EM: Indeed, but I do not believe that we Africans, any more than other people, should need to show the white man how good we are at speaking or writing his language, performing in his sports, learning his customs, manners and intellectual actions or to develop ourselves along the lines of his so-called 'universality', to be considered as human beings and his

equals. It would not diminish racism a jot. Because the true universality is a common goal on the cultural, political and spiritual horizon, that will be reached only when all ethnic groups achieve, through an authentic dialogue, the many-faceted diamond shape and the full blossom of the deepest and widest human integrity.

I hold Aimé Césaire's *oeuvre* as vital, though, particularly as he was the first in the West Indies to insist on the fact that black people, there or elsewhere, must reject the prejudice, which the colonial masters have engrained into them, about their African origins being something to be ashamed of. I, for my part, have only relied, throughout my life, on two ideas – one, from the deepest heart of Africa, which constitutes the basis of *Ubuntu*: 'Man is man by and because of other men'; and the other the precept of Christ: 'Do unto others as you would have done unto you.' I do not bother with anything else.

Who were the artists that you met in Paris that you consider to have been influential?

EM: So I met the Danish surrealist group, that is, among others, Richard Mortensen, Egill Jacobsen, and particularly also, as I have said, Ejler Bille. At my studio on rue Daguerre, my neighbour was Henri Goetz, an American artist. Bille's neighbour was a German expressionist painter, Erwin Graumann, who remained a good companion to us until his death, and by the intermediary of whom I met German anti-Nazi artists, and befriended Hans Hartung in particular. In 1938 I also became friends with Alberto Giacometti. It was at his proposition – and to help me live closer to Sonja, who had her studio next door on rue du Moulin-Vert – that I even left my atelier in rue Daguerre for a little room on top of his atelier on the rue Hippolyte-Maindron. In fact, apart from his brother Diego, I can say I remained for nine years (interrupted by my four-year internment during World War Two) his nearest neighbour. We caught sight of each other practically every day, spoke from time to time, and were always ready to give a hand, for mutual support, if need be. Sonja knew that she could always count on Alberto, when we had a difficulty or were, as happened

once or twice, economically in a fix. He also gave Sonja some good advice on working with plaster. But it was above all his unique personality that brought us one of the richest experiences in our life.

Later you left for Denmark and took part in the CoBrA group.

Could you tell me about your meetings with the other members of this group such as Constant and Asger Jorn?

EM: In Denmark, we were members of the Höst group and later the CoBrA group in the years 1948 to 1950, together with, among many others, Asger Jorn, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Henry Heerup, Erik Thommesen, Egill Jacobsen, and our Dutch comrades Karel Appel, Constant Nieuwenhuys and Guillaume Cornelis van Beverloo. But Sonja and I were rather isolated in a little village, going to Copenhagen only for meetings with our Höst or CoBrA friends. Then came some misunderstandings in the group, and we soon left the country. I felt a certain form of silent opposition to Sonja and me that hardly manifested itself openly, but, for instance, invitations to take part in exhibitions of the group inexplicably never reached us. I think that there was a certain irritation towards Sonja for repeatedly insisting on the movement, and also, taking into account the plight of people still colonized by Europe. Though most of the founding members of CoBrA agreed with us – Jorn wrote a letter to us just after the movement ended, expressing his solidarity with our attitude and his understanding of our reasons to go away – it seemed that the time had not yet come in 1950 for the question to be clearly posed. The embarrassment that my presence caused – to the point of making me, in their eyes, some sort of ‘Invisible Man’ or merely the consort of a European woman artist – was understandable, as before me, there had never been, to my knowledge, any black man taking part in the visual arts ‘avant-garde’ of the Western world. Of course, Wifredo Lam showed his work alongside the surrealists in Paris, but he was a Creole, from an independent country, Cuba. Personally, coming from a colony where people were segregated by the law, but which was still vital economically for Europe, my status was unclear. And probably it was also our very conception of mankind and of art that not only contributed to our

isolation from some in the group, but that invalidated us in the appreciation of the official art world, especially later, in the eyes and the evaluation of certain critics and art historians. Some critics totally obliterate my participation in the movement, as modest as it admittedly has been, for the reason that my work was suspected of not being European enough, and, in his words, ‘betraying [my] African origins’.

I’m interested in knowing what kind of relationship you maintained with Africa in those years.

EM: In those days, I also met regularly with my friend Gerard Sekoto, who had fled South Africa for Paris after the war. We discussed the news from home. And as he was at the time more in contact with other artists and intellectuals of the Parisian or English scene than myself, he kept me informed. I also had a few meetings at the library Présence Africaine with Alioune Diop. And from the 50s to the early 60s, I was a regular, or rather irregular, correspondent of the magazine *Le Musée vivant*, which was at the time the only French publication genuinely interested in giving the word from time to time to African intellectuals and artists. I had a rich dialogue for many years with Madeleine Rousseau, its editor, who, it must be said, with unbelievable courage – given the colonial context – faced the confrontation with the Other. She offered a possibility of expression and a platform for dialogue to people from the so-called ‘Third World’, at a difficult time, until the political pressure became too intense, because the struggles for independence had begun.

Can you tell me about the oscillation between figuration and abstraction in your work?

EM: In my painting, it is difficult to say whether the central form is figurative or abstract. But that does not bother me. What I am concerned with is whether the form can bring to life and transmit, with the strongest effect and by the lightest means possible, the being which has been in me and aspires to expression in the stuff that is at hand. Our history has brought about, little by little, this dichotomy between abstraction and figuration,

which provokes, more and more, a terrible atomization in the very essence of life. In no domain more than in the arts has this systematic dichotomy caused such destruction to the very foundation of the human identity as both belonging to nature and sharing in the essence of an ideal being. Certain artists in Europe have too often been under the dictatorship of philosophy, or what is known under that name – which denomination, by the way, has always been puzzling to me, because that area of learning has for a long time been used not so much to put into practice any love of wisdom, as its name would imply, but rather for trying to fit our conception of man into the social structures offered by history, at any given time. Moreover, certain philosophers in Europe have had a more or less hidden aim to get rid of art altogether, for supposedly belonging to some outdated form of humanity, or to replace it by some purely intellectual ersatz that would help discipline and control the inspired freedom of poetry, a concern shared by the political authority – this, as far as I can understand, was the main motivation behind the foundation of the Academy. Hence we have lost the capacity to unite in our vision the outward aspect with the inner significance. Because our eye has been mis-educated, so to speak, by the superficiality of academicism, which can only estimate the worth of any representation of man according to its abidance by the purely aesthetic rules it has established; for example, the one decreeing that the human head must come eight times (or seven; I have forgotten) into the full length of the body. So when they see an African sculpture with, for example, an enormous head and short legs, they will consider it ugly and judge it ‘worthless’. But for the African artist, it is not so much the abidance by certain rules (though he, too, generally, works according to particular canons) that makes a thing beautiful, but its capacity to evoke the inner being, by the strength of the outward aspect. To that effect, he uses all means, both figurative and abstract. When in my younger days I made the *Bantu Madonna*, I worked along certain European or classical canons, which some believers in the conception of ‘progress’ in art will judge outdated. In the *Madonna*, I followed a certain canon that was in contradiction with the newest cubist or abstract ways and forms (which I at

the time hardly knew anyway) but without ever stopping my struggle with a style that was foreign to me. And the viewer, I hope, if I am lucky enough to have been understood and heard, can feel – under the surface of the classical mould – an African heart beat. At times, the inner spirit breaks through, first in the very innovation within the South African context of taking a black woman to represent the Virgin Mary, and secondly in the warmth of the pulse that, though provisionally contained by the strictness of the style, speaks up under the skin or surface and threatens to burst free.

In 1962 you wrote, 'For the object of African art is not to please the eye or the senses but to use art as a means, as a language, to express feelings and ideas in relation to the present, the future and the past, to discover new concepts by which to regard the world for the salvation of man.'

EM: Yes, I remember when I wrote these lines. In fact, I would not change a word today. I think that this definition is still valid and could apply to the way I personally see my vocation as an artist, even in the world to which I still belong, at this the beginning of the twenty-first century. In my opinion, a certain evolution of art, in the second part of the twentieth century, has been influenced by the misunderstandings around Duchamp. Duchamp never pretended that exhibiting a manufactured product was, in itself, art. But the world, the so-called 'art world', has always behaved as if he had. In fact, as he himself insisted, his readymade, bought at the supermarket and put upon a pedestal, is only a challenge thrown at the face of the Academy and its spiritually empty canons. However, the misunderstanding became the accepted interpretation of this artist because it fitted into the aims of a certain established nihilism, which, under the fastidious form of an objective aestheticism, in turn came to constitute a sort of new academism. Hence the development, among many creators, of a more or less imposed or self-imposed notion of non-art considered as art, which had the advantage of getting rid of the problem posed in a materialistic society by the invisible and by the enduring power of the universal mask without ever facing the question: 'What is art?'

I believe that one cannot answer this question, as long as one has the false idea that humanity can be pigeonholed into different categories. That is why, for instance, I could never be considered as an artist in the South Africa of the early 30s, where the Commissioner for Native Affairs wished me to make what the colonial authority called ‘native art’. There was a time when, also in Europe, even among apparently progressive people, or certain modern artists, the notion existed that there was an art for the ‘savages’, which was only fit for them and could never be appreciated seriously by modern humanity. Bertolt Brecht spoke of ‘children of science’. One day, at the end of the 50s, I met a well-known modern painter of the so-called ‘Hard Edge’ group. When he saw me, together with Sonja Ferlov, he said, addressing both of us, ‘Ah, it is you who like the art of the negroes. They are too full of sensuality, always making sculptures with a big sex, while we modern artists of Europe have left behind these primitive obsessions. Here, it is all geometry, purity of lines and clarity of the intellect.’ When I tried to tell him that there was also geometry in African art, he shook his head and went away. For me, art can only be founded on the single notion – of which it is both the confirmation and the proof – that Man is One. That is why an expression from a most foreign culture, let’s say New Guinea, or the Mexico of the Aztecs – and even without my having any knowledge of the particular customs and rites that gave birth to it – may touch me to the core, and sometimes infinitely more than some from my own cultural background and times. And this does not make me a primitivist, in any way. Only that the first condition for entering the world of the spiritual expression we call art is to be open to the Other, even to the ultimate Other, whoever he be, with the knowledge, so well condensed by Arthur Rimbaud in his famous phrase, that: ‘*Je est un autre*’ [‘*I is somebody else*’]. It is still today shocking to many that he, the ‘Gaul with blue eyes’, as he called himself, should at times during his years of poetry have seen himself as ‘*un nègre*’. But it is upon this very awareness that he founded the meaning of any true modernity. Our present times, though, have completely misunderstood the notion, because when we hear Rimbaud’s message: ‘*Il faut être absolument moderne*’ [‘*One must be absolutely modern*’], we think it is about driving

the fastest car, surrounded by all the paraphernalia of the very latest technology, when what is meant is much deeper and more radically subversive to all upon which we have based our society and our conceptions – even that of ‘modernity’. That is why the fact of seeing creations from the farthest elsewhere may help us to break free from our prejudices and our formalistic or ethnic enclosures.

I remember how my friend Gerard Sekoto, in our younger days, was fascinated when I showed him reproductions of pictures by Van Gogh, and how touched he was – to the point of being inspired by it in his own work – when I told him the story of this Dutch painter’s life while we stood in the middle of the bush, near a distant country village in a tribal zone of the northern Transvaal.

Like Asger Jorn you have been very interested in the folk art from Greenland.

EM: Asger Jorn had participated, with other surrealists, in the reappraisal and enthusiastic appreciation of ancient African art. When the Second World War broke out, he could no longer travel but stayed in Denmark, where he could not see so many works from Africa and Oceania. So it dawned upon him that in the north, too, they possessed an original, primitive, pre-Christian art, which had previously been neglected or misrepresented: that of the Vikings, and also, in Greenland, that of the Eskimo people, who had lived for so long out of reach of the influences of modern history. Together with Asger, all the members of CoBrA were touched by the strength, simplicity and boldness of this expression. Sonja Ferlov was also fascinated by the reports of the great polar explorer Knud Rasmussen, who had lived for a long time among the Eskimos, and had described abundantly their culture and customs. I was influenced by the art of the Eskimos, essentially in its economy of means and its capacity to treat just the essential, in a harsh and difficult environment of nature.

Can you think of any unrealized project of yours, a project that you have dreamed about, but could not fulfil?

EM: Yes, but I am not thinking about an artistic one. For me, what is still not realized is a common acceptance and understanding between whites and blacks (as the most contrasted opposition in terms of colour, but between other races, as well). The dialogue has not started yet. It reminds me of a passage in one of the books of the Danish writer Karen Blixen, where she says that if the encounter or the meeting between blacks and whites has happened, historically, it has in fact not yet taken place.

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

I first met Felix Gonzalez-Torres in the early 1990s when I was in New York City and I invited him to Paris for an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, where I was working at the time. We'd always go to our favourite café, La Carette in place du Trocadéro, and get the mini-pastries he loved, then walk back to the museum. He mounted an exhibition with his billboards, part of our Migrateurs series, and then one day he decided to buy some flowers and vases just to change the office. That was also part of his show, a secret side of the exhibition which only the museum employees could see. He thought that the flowers would change the spirit of the building and recreate it for those who spent so many hours inside. A year later we met again in Vienna and that's where this interview took place in the spring of 1994. We were in a TV studio where we'd been invited by the Museum in Progress, so this is one of the very few interviews that I've done that was also filmed professionally rather than with my fragile little camera.

How to destroy the aura of the artwork

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *Can you tell me about your “Untitled” (Passport # 1) of 1991, is this piece somehow emblematic of your work?*

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES: That ‘Passport piece No. 1’ – which is a white stack, twenty-four by twenty-four by six inches high, with sheets of white paper that the public can take – functions like most of my work.^{*} I need a viewer. I need a public for that work to exist. Without a viewer, without a public, this work has no meaning, it’s just another fucking, boring sculpture sitting on the floor and that is not what this work is all about. This work is about an interaction with the public, or a large collaboration. That ‘Passport piece’ is really about the way we are defined in our culture, the way our sense of self is constructed through many different channels. One of these channels is that little thing called ‘passport’ which identifies us as being some type of gender, coming from some kind of country and also being born somewhere at a certain date. To top it all off, it has numbers; that’s what we are, that number is unique, no one else in America has that number except me. And that again is another definition of who we are, in a very abstract way. One of the things that has bugged the hell out of me over the last few years is this whole talk about ‘body art’, which is almost like the criminal system. These people, in order to think about a body, to talk about a body, need to see a body. As if you are going to a gallery, you see five bodies hanging everywhere; people say, ‘Oh, it’s about the body.’ I say, ‘Well, no shit, but it is not really about the body, it’s about wax, or it’s about plaster’, because the body at this time in our history, at this time in culture, is defined not just by the flesh but also by the law, by legislations, and by language above all. Therefore, when we feel pain in the body, when we feel decay in the body, when we feel pleasure in the body ... all those issues are

very much related to the law or to the symbolic order – in that case, to the phallogocentric order. Of course, there is our rejection or our acceptance of that order, sometimes we accept certain parts and sometimes we reject certain parts. But that functions only vis-à-vis the definition that is based on language. So I think that when you see a passport, what you are really seeing there is a body, because it is about a definition of a body; a body that can travel from one place to another. And it's only based on the fact that there is a passport that defines us, that can sometimes be helpful or detrimental.

The articulation between private matters and public issues really constitutes the thread in your work. I'm thinking here also, for instance, of your project for MoMA [‘Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres’, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992] which consisted first of photographic billboards of an unmade bed displayed in twenty-four sites around New York City (‘Untitled’, 1991, but also of the installation of an unmade bed inside of the museum).

FG-T: The billboards for MoMA came from a very specific personal impulse. I needed to see my bed, but I needed distance first of all. Let me put it this way for you: I needed distance from my bed, and that bed became a site that was not only the place I sleep in, it was also the place of pain at night. That was the personal impulse. And then there are also the formal issues that just influence the way we work, right? I was asked by MoMA to do this show and I am someone who tries to be honest about the way I feel ... at least, I try. So, when I went to MoMA, when I went to see the room – it is such a beautiful room – I said, ‘Why fuck it up with art? This place does not need any art, it is a very beautiful space, let's do something outside.’ And besides that, they have so much art in there already! So I said, ‘Why don't we do something that includes all the possibilities and that is not just this very prescribed notion of having a project in which you just show your wares like in a showroom?’ So, the initial idea was not to even show anything inside the museum, not to have any billboards inside, just to have the

booklets that told people where to go to see the things in the streets. But of course, they had some problems with that at the museum. It is almost like they need to see the monetary worth. So I put one piece there, which I am happy I did now, and then I showed, like you said, twenty-four billboards of the same image at twenty-four places in the city.

What was particular about this unmade bed inside the museum?

FG-T: It was an unmade bed in which two people had slept and left their impression on the bed, on the pillows. At this point, we have to question if there is anything – if there really exists any division between public and private. Recent developments in America – and I can only talk about America, because that's where I live, that's where I am – have proven that there is no such thing as a private space or a public space, especially for certain segments of the population, who love people from the same gender, from the same sex. I am referring, you know, to the year 1986, the case of *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, in which the Supreme Court voted that gay men and lesbians have no right to privacy. They voted that the state could actually go into their bedrooms and legislate and penalize the way they express their love to each other. You know the words 'Some people are more equal than others' – but that's another story. I think at this point in history what we are really talking about is private property (and perhaps not even that) and not about private space, because our most intimate desires, fantasies and stories are intersected by areas legislated and controlled by the law. And again, when we are talking about public spaces, I always wonder how public it is when Phillip Morris and Marlboro can actually pay for these public spaces. When I started making these stacks in 1981, it was because – it may sound funny – at that time in New York everybody was fighting for wall space, I mean, the walls were all already taken. When you were going to be in a group show, you had to get into a fistfight to get two inches on the wall. So I said, 'Fuck the walls, I'll just do something on the floor.' No one was doing sculptures, now everyone is doing 'give-away stuff'. But that is just one point, the other thing is that I have always been very interested in the writings of Walter Benjamin, especially at that time I was just coming out

of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. That's where I read Benjamin for the first time – some point between 1981 and 1983. I was very influenced by his writing and the relevance of that writing in our time and culture, so I wanted to make a work that took some of his ideas into consideration. What's important is that the work does not really exist; works are destroyed because there is never an original.

Another way of putting this is to say that it's unlimited.

FG-T: It's an unlimited issue, you know.

The idea that the real problem is not the beginning or the end of a thing but more to do with its 'in-between' qualities of existence is reinforced by this issue of the unlimitedness, I think. It's unsettling because the work itself, in its production and 'de-production' modes, is completely unstable.

FG-T: The work is always extremely unstable. But that is one thing that I enjoy very much. I enjoy that danger, that instability, that in-between-ness. If you want to relate it to a personal level, I think the work is pretty close to that real life situation that I am confronted with daily as a gay man: a way of being in which I am forced by culture and by language to always live a life of 'in-between'. So the work was an attempt – especially at that time, in 1987–9, when we were still at the height of the '80s boom ... you might want to call it 'art market', right? – to deal with the fact that having this stack on the floor that was not an original – you could never have an original – that you could show this piece in three places at the same time and that it would still be the same piece. And it was almost like a threat, not only a threat, but a re-interpretation of that art market and the marketing of an original piece, which it really never is. And at the same time, the work is almost like a metaphor because you cannot destroy something that does not exist. The same applies to the billboard; it just disappeared, but will come out again under different cover, in a different cultural, historical context.

It was a similar process in Venice for 'Aperto '93': the stack was very small, so very quickly it was not visible anymore, but it could

reappear in any other place. You said that it was also a metaphor for human relationships.

FG-T: It was not just dealing with the ideas of Walter Benjamin and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936] and trying to destroy the aura of the artwork but also, on a more personal level, it was about learning to let go. When I first made a show with Andrea Rosen, which was only stacks, the whole show could have disappeared if you'd have had a lot of people coming to it, because everything was free for the people to take. Just to quote Sigmund Freud: 'We rehearse our worst fears in order to lessen them', right? So, at that time, I was losing Ross, and I wanted to lose everything in order to rehearse that fear and just confront that fear and perhaps learn something from it. So I even wanted to lose the work, this stuff that is very important in my life. I also wanted to learn to let go. The first piece I made, those slides, have to do with America. They have to do with freedom in America, with the desire for freedom in America and again, it is very important to mention that those pieces are very democratic too, because whoever has them, whoever installs them, decides on the installation of the piece: how the piece is going to look, how it's going to be installed. They are all exactly the same but at the same time they are different in the sense that they are always installed differently. Therefore, they all have different titles. And it's not so important how I install them for the first time. Sometimes I don't even install them for the first time. After that, whoever gets them, a collector, or a museum, or an art handler, or an art installer at a gallery will decide how this piece is installed. I have no say; once I lose my domain, the piece is on its own and it gets installed any way the person wants it; it can be on/up, whatever.

So it is very different from most conceptual or minimal art where there are certificates that are used as control tools.

FG-T: Yes, I don't have that phobia of the two inches. You know: 'If a work is two inches to the left, you have to destroy the work!' No, that's just that big thing from the 60s; they were constipated. I always say, 'Honey, take a

bow and relax, no big deal, two inches, three inches.’ But it is funny because when I send this stuff to museums, art handlers and historians have a hard time deciding what to do with them. They keep faxing us back saying, ‘What do we do with this thing?’ and we keep faxing them back saying, ‘Whatever you want!’ and they just don’t believe it. They say, ‘This cannot be true!’

They would rather refuse the liberty that you offer to them?

FG-T: Right – they want the traditional conceptual instruction saying ‘five inches to the left, six inches to the right and then twenty-two feet down’, and I say, ‘No, you do whatever you want. You are responsible for the piece. You are responsible for the construction of the piece.’ In the same way, I tell the viewer, ‘You are responsible for the final meaning of this piece of paper that is part of this stack.’ And that’s problematic on many levels, because what is the piece? Is the piece the simple sheet of paper or is the piece the stack? Well, it could be both and I never define which one is which. I like that ‘in-between-ness’ that makes the work difficult to define, hopefully.

What about “Untitled” (A Portrait) from 1991, your video piece without images, but only subtitles giving information about the images, which viewers can only invent? Why did you call those ‘portraits’?

FG-T: I asked people if they wanted to do a portrait of someone. I asked them to give me a list of personal events and public events that have affected their lives and then I just read them and I added new ones or went back and asked them for more information. The whole thing is based on the idea of a photograph. In our culture, we read photographs in two ways: what is denoted and what is connoted. What is denoted is the kind of thing that gives us very little to argue about, for example: if it is a black-and-white photograph, if it is a photo of a man or a woman, if this man or woman has long hair, short hair, blonde hair, brown hair, black hair, curly hair, big eyes, small eyes, whatever; that is the stuff that is denoted. The person is wearing

a shirt or is wearing a coat, or is wearing nothing; that's denoted. But what is connoted is the other way of reading the photographs, which for me is the most interesting, because it has to do with the text that we have in our heads: 'This person with the long hair, is that a 60s haircut or is that a Vidal Sassoon 70s haircut? Is that just a simple T-shirt or is it a Dolce & Gabbana T-shirt, or is it a Pierre Cardin T-shirt? Is that building in the background an Adolf Loos or is it a Corbusier?' That is what is connoted! In order for us to read a photograph, we have to have a language transaction. The only way we can read a photograph is through language. So I decided to go the other way, to get rid of the image and just use the language. In order to read a photograph, this person who was getting the portrait made gives me a date, let's say for example 'Silverhouse 1964', and none of us had a fucking idea what 'Silverhouse' is, but the person does have a very specific idea, you know, as a subject, of what 'Silverhouse' meant in his or her life. It is the same when we look at a photograph. The photograph, really, as Barthes said, does not have an index, it just isn't telling us much, it is just a photograph of a woman, but where was this woman? Was she in Vienna, Berlin, Havana? I mean, where was this woman, where was this photograph taken? There is very little that these photographs can tell us. In a way, the portrait of Austrian Airlines [*"Untitled" (Portrait of Austrian Airlines)*, 1993, exhibited with museum in progress production, Vienna, 1993] was related to the same work I have been doing for the last five years on portraits. These portraits are painted directly on the wall in a room, way up high, like a frieze, a Greek frieze, all around the room.

Again, it triggers travels, at least imaginary ones.

FG-T: With the portrait of Austrian Airlines, I wanted to give the people something very beautiful and something that would enable them to travel in their minds to all these places and imagine what it's like when they see Amman, when they see Minsk, when they see Moscow, when they see London, when they see the word New York. Some of them had been there, or had seen pictures of these places, or maybe wanted to go to these places, or maybe they don't want to go there at all. But at least these places are

there, and hopefully when they read these texts something about these places will be triggered in their minds. For me, the ideal thing is when something takes place, when there is some action, when there is some movement, when there is some travel in the mind, when the work becomes some kind of catalytic element for something to happen, for something to become possible. Think of the light string at Jennifer Flay that allowed the viewer to go to the dancing, and the public started to dance. It was a completely new perspective for me because, as you know, I had two couples who were supposed to come and do it and then suddenly the viewer, the public started doing it.

And what's really beautiful is that it kept on going, it exceeded the time span of any performance.

FG-T: It kept on going! That was a very nice surprise for me. But again, the viewer is something that I love, is something that I need for the work to exist, to happen, for the final meaning of the work. Because otherwise, like I said before, this is another boring minimal piece of shit sitting on the floor and that is not what my work is all about. That is a problem when I apply for grants because they get these slides of these things sitting on the floor and – especially when there are sculptors as part of the panel – they look at this stuff and say ‘Oh’, you know, ‘Sculptures!’ But this is not what it is really about. This is almost like an excuse to really find my role as an artist because I see myself almost like a theatre director directing a very spontaneous performance. Even with a stack, when the viewer takes the paper from the stack, or takes the booklet from the stack, or when the viewer takes the candy and eats it and shits – you know, that candy piece at the end, because that is the final piece when the candy or the sweet gets eaten and then is spilt as shit from the body – that is again an ultimate collaboration, because I am actually giving energy to this body to function.

And this also echoes what you told me the other day, that you saw yourself as a kind of infiltrator, as a kind of spy?

FG-T: 'I want to be a spy' means I want to be the one that looks like something else in order to infiltrate, in order to function as a virus. The virus is our worst enemy but should also be our model in terms of not being the opposition anymore, not being very easily defined, so that then we can attach ourselves to institutions which are always going to be there. And, as Althusser said, these institutions, or these *ideological* institutions, are always replicating themselves. If we are attached to them as a virus, we will replicate alongside them. As we know, these ideological apparatuses are never going away, they are always going to be there and when we think we have pinned them down, they replicate themselves somewhere else. I think that's a fascinating aspect of being an infiltrator or working as a virus – being attached to these institutions.

So, going back to the beginning of this interview, to the MoMA project with the billboards in the city and the unmade bed displayed in the museum: that's why it is important to operate a constant transgression of the borders between the 'inside' and the 'outside', the 'public' and the 'private'.

FG-T: Right, absolutely. And there is also the content of that work. I mean, it's not just about two empty beds. It's about the way some people read it in the streets. It was about emptiness, it was about homelessness, it was about, you know, love, man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, whatever; it was about an announcement for a movie that was about to come; it was about advertisement for a White Sale at Bloomingdale's. It could be about anything. And that is exactly the way I want it to function, because some other readings could always be right. But the reading that I wanted to give to the work is very subtle, it is not about confrontation, it is about being accepted. And then, once you accept these things in your life then I say to you: 'But I just want you to know that this is about this', and then it is already too late, it is already inside the room.

FRANK GEHRY

It was Philip Johnson, the architect and curator, who was ninety-nine years old when I met him, who encouraged me to meet Gehry in the first place. He compared his drawings to Hermann Finsterlin, the German visionary architect, who I studied while growing up in Switzerland. In the conversation I was interested to hear about Gehry's early years in 1950s Los Angeles, and how the art scene there was as important to him as the architectural context. I got to know Frank Gehry personally when Julia Peyton-Jones and I invited him to design the Serpentine Pavilion, and we have had many conversations ever since.

While many of the interviews we have conducted have taken place in his studio, I met with Gehry for the following interview from 2009 in Paris. I was curious to talk about his inspirations. For him it's the interplay between disciplines that captures his interest, and he has always talked a lot with musicians, artists and writers, meaning he sits in many different contexts.

As Gehry told me 'The arts are inspirational to each other, they were my kind of early support system when I was doing my initial work.'

He is best known today for his museum and gallery buildings, such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao, which we talk about here.

Architecture for all

HANS ULRICH OBRIST *Could we begin by talking about your childhood experience of museums in Canada and your beginnings in architecture?*

FRANK GEHRY: Well, I was eight years old when my mother took me to the art gallery. It's called the Art Gallery of Ontario now. Then, it was the Toronto Museum of Art. I saw a watercolour seascape by John Marin, and that was my first experience of a museum and of art. And I always remembered it. All through my life I've gone to museums and looked at art. It was very normal to do that. In the school system, the art classes were very meagre. In America, they're still meagre. It's a terrible void. The reason I got into architecture was that I was studying art at USC [the University of Southern California] and I took a course in ceramics. Someday I'll show the world those ceramic pieces – they're so funny!

You still have them?

FG: I have them. They're so funny! [*Laughs*] I made little figures, you know ... Anyway, the teacher saw these and he said, 'Forget about it!' He took me to his house, which was being designed by Raphael Soriano, who was a famous architect in Southern California at that time, who made structures in steel. He lectured about Bach and simplicity and he used to play Brandenburg Concertos for us and things like that. And he was anti-Frank Lloyd Wright, anti-baroque, anti- all that stuff. At the site they were putting up the steel and I saw this man: he had a black beret, black shirt, black coat, just like me, but I don't have the beret. And he was saying, 'No, no, no, put that there ...' Something about that must have been exciting to me at the time, and when we got back to the school my teacher said he thought I should take a class in architecture.

And which year was this?

FG: Ye gods! Nineteen forty-nine? I was twenty years old.

You also told me, when we last spoke in London, that even before that there was a moment of revelation, when in 1946 Alvar Aalto came to Canada and gave a lecture.

FG: Well, I remembered that afterwards. Once I became an architect I started to look at what people were doing and I became interested in Alvar Aalto's work because it was comfortable, it felt accessible 'humanistically', and it was still tough. It wasn't cute, it wasn't decorative. And I could perhaps also relate to it because I spent at least five or six years of my life in Northern Ontario in climates like Finland. So I had an exposure to that. In November 1946, I went to a lecture at the University of Toronto. I was sixteen or seventeen years old. I used to go to the lecture series by myself because none of my friends were interested in it. And this gentleman came out with a bent plywood chair and he talked about some buildings that were extraordinary. At that time, I wasn't interested in architecture. But after I became an architect, I remembered the lecture. When I went to Finland in 1972, I visited Aalto's office and I asked if they had a record of his lectures. And I asked them if in 1946 he was at the University of Toronto, and they discovered that yes, he was, the exact day.

Once I got into architecture school, some of the teachers had just returned from Japan – they'd been to Japan as GIs. And they'd seen the Ise Shrine and the Todaiji Temple and more. In Southern California in the early 1950s, after the war, they were building tract houses by the mile. The town was spreading horizontally. The suburbs were endless. And it was all being done very quickly with two-by-fours, wood, studs and plaster. You drove around; you'd see miles of unfinished wooden buildings as they were being constructed. And the aesthetic of Japan connected to that. It was easy to imagine building wooden Japanese-style houses within this language. My early interest became that. I got to know Japanese classical architecture. I could tell you every detail, even though I hadn't been there yet. And I was

interested in the paintings and the woodcuts and Hokusai, Hiroshige. The music – *gagaku* – imperial court music. I actually played in a *gagaku* orchestra. [*Laughs*] People thought I was turning Japanese! It was funny. They used to make fun of me. But I hadn't, through school, been exposed much to European modernism. Corbusier seemed like: big ideas, overpowering, mechanized, not accessible. Gropius seemed industrial. Breuer seemed cold, by comparison to the Japanese wooden stuff. And Aalto is the only one ...

Aalto was your only Western hero?

FG: Yeah. And still is, probably. Because it's not polemical. It's very matter-of-fact and yet it's beautiful art. It has a modesty to it that I like.

So here you are in LA, in the 1950s, but this was before it became an art capital. I spoke a lot with Walter Hopps when he was still alive and he told me about that nascent moment when he launched the Ferus Gallery, but obviously before LA had lots of museums. The Pasadena Museum was very active, but there was no MoCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] yet, there wasn't yet that museum landscape. So what was the LA contemporary art scene like? When did you start to connect to that? And was the Walter Hopps Pasadena context important?

FG: Yeah, I knew Walter. I was working at Victor Gruen's office in LA and we were doing shopping centres. The LA art scene took place on Monday nights at La Cienega Boulevard. We'd go there every Monday night and slowly, over time, I met the artists. At first it was Judy Chicago, Lloyd Hamrol and names that you may not even know: Phil Heffernan ... Ron Davis was part of it – but I only knew their art. I didn't know them. I met Judy and a few others.

And I was building my first buildings in 1964. I left Gruen in 1960 and came to France for one year. And when I came here, I saw the light! [*Laughs*] I realized that my teachers had made the cathedrals and the great works, the Romanesque art and architecture, seem trivial.

Could you talk more about this notion of 'tough' decoration?

FG: I grew up as a modernist – it was anti-beaux arts at my school in the late 1940s and 50s. And so decoration was, like Adolph Loos said, a sin. When I saw Autun Cathedral, I had an epiphany. The sculptor Giselbertus did the figures on the tympanum, and they're not decorative, they're very tough – they're part of the architecture. From the beginning, I was always looking for those connections and I think even today, in Paris, with the museum we're working on now, I'm very interested in bringing art to the outside of the building and making it part of it. Those sculptures – like the guy with the donkeys – they're very simple, very minimal. They grow right out of the building, somehow. Originally the decor was painted and was inside the Romanesque churches, but this was on the outside, so it was more like the stone. And I suppose there are always statues, like on Chartres, but the statues on the Gothic cathedrals seem very soft and are more decorative, whereas the Romanesque sculpture has an integrity, and probably being this minimal was against the time when it was done. It probably wasn't the norm. It's very strong and very sculptural and he let the quality of the stone remain; he didn't try to cover it up and make it pretty.

You worked, just before coming to France, for the commercial architect Gruen, so it was a great contrast from that sort of commercial architecture to your research in France. How did this change your work?

FG: Well, I was working for commercial architecture because the training you had as an architect, at that time, was that architecture is a service business. And you have to be careful of budgets and schedules and working with clients. Commercial architecture is driven by that, so there's not much chance to do anything artistic, if you want to call it that. During that period, I was looking at art. My art education was growing fast. It was counter to everything I was doing. The thing that kept me doing the commercial thing was my interest in building cities. It was a sense of social responsibility – that, in order to be relevant, the buildings had to have some kind of social

relationship with the community, with the world. You're building a city. You're building places for people to live. Making the two come together – art and that social idea – has always been a very difficult marriage. And in fact, even today, if you read the architectural press since the economy's gone down, most people are ready to throw the [Guggenheim Museum] Bilbao kind of architecture under the bus, even if the actual building cost was very modest – eighty million euros for thirty-two thousand square metres (so cheap). It's 'Forget it! We're not going to do that any more.' There's a kind of lemming-like return to this austerity as a value, even in the face of losing the heart and soul of a community by doing it.

So you feel that's something that's happened since we last spoke – in the last couple of months?

FG: Yeah. It's interesting, if you read most of the press now, even really good critics are saying it. But I'm old enough to have lived through it before. It's just a period. We'll get over it soon.

Going back to your early years, you've had many conversations and collaborations with artists, whether with Claes Oldenburg or Richard Serra. Your friendship with Sophie Calle. I'm curious to hear how your conversations with artists came about in those early years.

FG: Well, from the very first building I did in LA, the architects at the time were very judgemental. I don't think I was doing anything that crazy, but in their minds I was doing things that they didn't, or couldn't, feel good about. The LA artists used to come around and look at the buildings. I became friends with them and I found it freer, more interesting. They were exploring things that I thought architects should explore – form, perceptual ideas – like Bob Irwin, James Turrell and Doug Wheeler. And surface – the candy-apple surfaces of the motorcycle guys: Billy Bengtson and some of the others. It seemed very direct and more relevant to the making of things.

A principle of free association, somehow?

FG: Yes, it was free association, but it was also the talent and the will to learn a technique. Serra went to the shipyards, saw the way the ships were being built, became entranced with it. It became a kind of a power thing for him, which, if you know his personality, fits perfectly. And he'd then be able to move tons of steel and make powerful, gutsy statements that fit his personality. He found a way to do it. The others, like Ed Ruscha, explored the printed word, but he explored the ordinary. I was always fascinated by Ruscha because he didn't think much about architecture. And Claes Oldenburg was playing with form and humour. My friend Bob Venturi, his two favourite artists were Ruscha and Oldenburg, and he talked about it in some of his early books and writings.

Yeah, Learning from Las Vegas was triggered by Ruscha's little books.

FG: Ruscha is one of my friends and I used to ask him if he knew about Venturi and he said he didn't know who he was, had never heard of him. This disconnect was interesting and whenever I brought them together, neither Ruscha nor Oldenburg would have a clue what Venturi was talking about. And yet he was using their references. They didn't see the correlation between his use of those references and their work. That was always fascinating to me.

Did you know John Baldessari?

FG: Yeah, but not as much. I wasn't as much with him, although today I'm designing his home. I was with Michael Asher a lot. But the guy that spun my wheels and turned me around was Robert Rauschenberg. My first encounters with his work turned the light bulbs on: that you could use ordinary stuff and make beauty from it. Some of my early works were inspired by that. Because you couldn't get good workmanship, so I used plywood and stuff, very matter-of-fact, and it was accessible and you could make beautiful spaces with it.

So Rauschenberg was another kind of epiphany?

FG: Yeah. And then I got to know him and I used to spend a lot of time with him, until four in the morning, talking about things. And, you know, if you look back at the Combines, you see that that was probably one of the most important statements in the twentieth century – as powerful as Warhol for me.

I've had long conversations with the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, and he often said that everything in the second part of the twentieth century was influenced by film – in novels, architecture, or whatever one was doing, film would somehow play a role. So I was wondering, besides the epiphany with Japan, the epiphany with France and with Rauschenberg, was there any kind of epiphany for you in relation to film?

FG: No, not really. I loved that movie by Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Red Desert* [1964]. Antonioni interested me, but no, I wasn't much of a film person. You know, living in LA in the 1950s, the film world was like some kind of crazy place. It wasn't that interesting. It was commercial. I didn't find the people very interesting. It was fun. It was just something you did to go out and have fun.

But not an epiphany.

FG: Not an epiphany, no. The only epiphany I had was with Sydney Pollack, but that's much later. We used to talk about the relationship between the commercial aspects of a film or the commercial aspects of a building, and the art aspects of film and architecture. There was a very small percentage of areas where you could make a difference, because the economic models were driven by pro-forma systems that had to do with the banking system and all the things that have now failed, which did prevail in those times. You had to meet those stringent requirements or else the buildings or films wouldn't get done. So that similarity was interesting.

It was about constraints, really.

FG: Yeah. And, and I think that talented people use constraints to an advantage. I think of it like surfing. You're going to get on the board, you're going to get the wave, but *how* you manage it is that fifteen per cent of pure ingenuity, or whatever it is that we bring to the table as architects.

It's interesting that you mention surfing. I was just rereading this beautiful Haruki Murakami book: What I Talk About When I Talk About Running. He uses the analogy of running to talk about being a writer. I remember, in a previous conversation, you mentioned ice hockey as an analogy with architecture.

FG: Yes, I see a relationship. The best ice-hockey players are beautiful skaters, almost as good as figure skaters – as good as Peggy Fleming and people like that. When they skate, it's pure poetry. And you add to it the pressure of the game, the stick handling and then the other people on the ice. If you could just do it all alone, it would be great! *[Laughs]* But it's very intuitive and you never know where the puck's going to go. So you have to be prepared, and I think it's analogous not just to architecture but to life. If you design a building for a site in France, you have to work with the French culture because they're going to build it, they're going to use it and their approach is different. And so we're constantly having to adjust and it's like watching the puck move. If I just stayed here when the puck's over there, I'd lose. So, there is an analogy. There's also the hand-eye coordination. I'm not a very good skater, but I can always shoot the puck between the legs of the goalie. It's uncanny, I do it all the time! I don't even know how I do it. I even warn them that I'm gonna do it and they say, 'You'll never do it', and I do it. Because it's hand-eye coordination. It's some kind of miraculous thing that happens. I also sail; I like sailboats. This building's about sailboats.

Could you tell me more about your sailing?

FG: Yeah. In fact, I have a French sailboat, a Beneteau 44.7. Sailing, for me, is the only thing that I do where I can forget everything. I just totally relax. And the reason is that you have to be constantly aware of each part of the

boat: where it's going, what you're doing, what the sails are doing. It's peaceful and it's violent at the same time. I love it when it's violent. When the waves whoosh. It's scary and we get wet sometimes. It's so ancient – there's nothing new. But then, it's all new. It's a constant refinement. The boats are constantly being refined: different hulls, different designers, different materials. It's a world in a microcosm that relates a person to nature very directly and powerfully so that you and nature become partners when you go out there. It's a little different from anything else. I suppose gliding would be similar.

What was the first museum you designed? Was it the Cabrillo Marine Biology Museum in 1979?

FG: I think so. That was interesting. To research that I went to several aquariums and the tradition is that you walk into a dark space and you have a glass window where you see the fish. And that was every aquarium in the world. And now, the glass walls have gotten bigger. You can go into the aquarium and you're almost *with* the fish. That's one experience. When I visited these aquariums, the marine biologists were cleaning the aquariums. At one place, I saw these two rubber boots in the water and the guy had a little scoop and all of the people in the museum, all the visitors, were watching him. And I realized that, for a child, if you just go through the dark room and see the fish, maybe they explain where they're from and that this is such and such fish – but if a kid could go behind the scenes and see the marine biologists working behind the scenes as they're preparing the exhibits, then maybe they'd become interested in the topic enough to say, 'When I grow up, I want to do that.' So at the Marine Museum, as you went through the tunnel, there were openings into the laboratories behind, so that you could always go behind the scenes. And it turned out to be very successful.

And was exhibition design a laboratory for you in terms of your relation to museums?

FG: It's interesting to work with the artist because, mostly, they really don't know how to show their work. They need an editor. That's why we need curators! [*Laughs*] But it was interesting playing in the space between the curator and the artist and the building. And the LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] buildings are terrible for art. We were always fighting the building. And each topic had a different set of requirements. What I always tried to do was establish the character of the artist. And I try to do that with buildings. I try to make the work part of the person commissioning it.

So the dialogue influences the end result a lot?

FG: The client is very important. It always makes it better. Working with Tom Krens in Bilbao was extraordinary. And I'm working with him again for the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi now. He's like an artist. If you asked him to sit down and write out a pro-forma for the Museum of the Future, he wouldn't do it. He visits artists' studios, he knows the artists, he spends time with them. He knows what people are thinking. He knows what will get people excited. And he knows that if he goes out into the desert in Abu Dhabi and creates a platform, he can get twenty artists to come in and work on it.

I just saw the Abu Dhabi scheme; there are these gigantic tubes in which artists will do major commissions, like in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. Could you talk a little bit about this?

FG: For the trips I took before doing the design, I stayed in a very fancy hotel: the Arab Emirates Palace, which is marble and very big and very beautiful and very luxurious. I noticed that the people, the natives, most of them live outside – they're outdoors people. Their heritage is outdoors. And I think it's still in their DNA. So I was trying to make a museum with public spaces that would be cool enough for people to spend time outside, and we didn't know how to do that. The most primitive cooling system is the Indian teepee. Because it's got a hole in the top, the heat goes out and it's cooler than if the hole was closed. And in my house, I have a skylight in the roof. I

push the button on a hot day and, in fifteen minutes, the place cools. So I was thinking of doing that. In the end we made these tubes and put them on top of the public spaces. And the client saw it and just loved it. I think maybe it was because it was similar to their architecture with the domes – they have buildings with repetitive shapes and they saw this building with repetitive shapes that were different from the domes and were quite taken with them. When we did them, we didn't know if they'd work or whether they were relevant, but we've since developed ways to use them. They do take the hot air out and reduce the temperature at the floor of the outdoor space by twenty degrees. It makes it more comfortable. But they're very expensive and we're now trying to figure out how to make them in a reasonable way.

The inside of a museum is an interesting issue and it's always been an issue ... For instance, when Frank Lloyd Wright built the Guggenheim in New York, he didn't care about contemporary art. He didn't care. He was only thinking of Japanese screens in *tokonomas* [alcoves] and so he made the little niches for the screens and the light came in and was beautiful. But it was terrible for art. And yet for twenty-five years Diane Waldman, the curator of the Guggenheim, because that was the only building she had, made exhibitions in that space that are very memorable, that took the terrible space for art and used it well. She used it perfectly for some shows and for others it didn't work. It didn't work with Rothko. When they put the Rothkos in, they felt uncomfortable in that space. Flavin: fantastic. Calder: fantastic. 'The Motorcycle Show': fantastic. And there were a lot of other painting shows that were great. Cai Guo-Qiang recently: great. So there's an adversity that the architecture proposes and it's like the grit in the clam, the irritant that makes the beautiful pearl. Over the years, it was possible to make the beautiful pearl in the Guggenheim. So it shows you that a building, even though in principle it could be a disaster, could be used well. In Paris, the Louvre is a palace: same problem. It's been used for art over the centuries, but it's a disastrous building for showing art. The contemporary reaction to all of that has been the neutral white-box gallery. And it's become a religious mantra. Gallery after gallery and building after

building has this. It's an easier space for curators to hang shows in because it's supposedly neutral, so the art has no conflict with the building. There are examples in recent history where those kinds of spaces have been built, but where they don't work with the contemporary art. The latest one was MoMA in New York. It has all the rectangular galleries; it did everything right, but it doesn't work. So it's the big question of whether galleries have shape or not, and what that does. Some of my colleagues have taken that over the moon, like Danny Libeskind did in Colorado, Denver. He's got sloping walls. The only way you can hang art is to build a structure in front.

And the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

FG: The Jewish Museum, right. And others have done that. It's got to be a partnership with the museum and the curators; they have to make it work. I think you can make anything work. You can put anything anywhere if you really want to and make it work. The painting holds its own. But context does change the feeling of a work. My own experience, a long time ago, was at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, when I saw four Brueghel paintings in the traditional room with the wainscot and the blue fabric walls and the skylight and the wood floors and they looked incredible to me. I'll never forget that. And then, a couple of years later, I went back and they were remodelling the museum so they had the four Brueghels in a little room with a nine-foot-high ceiling and I walked in and the Brueghels seemed this big [*gestures*]. Not that big. In fact, they're not this big and they're not that big, they're this big. So the different perception of different places does impact. Years ago, I saw a tiny Paul Klee painting in Korea in a gallery that Samsung had with twenty-foot-high ceilings, and the little painting was incredible. It could hold the room, steal the space. And we just did the renovation of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto where we have small paintings. Circumstantially, we have rooms that are forty-five feet high, because we couldn't put another floor in – I wanted to have a skylight. There are small Canadian paintings in there, and it works like a dream. The issue is, if you make these sterilized boxes, if they get too sterilized, they

also conflict with the art. Arte Povera [Poor Art], for example, cannot stand some of those spaces.

They can become homogenized in some way.

FG: Yeah. It screws it all up. So I think it's up to the curators to understand. But in this building, most of the galleries are, in the end, rectilinear.

So the white cube is just one possibility and it's surrounded by many other possibilities, which are worth being explored. One model, which is the complete opposite of the white cube and which I've always loved, is Sir John Soane's Museum in London, where the nineteenth-century architect Sir John Soane developed this interior complexity. I know that it's a museum that you also like very much.

FG: Well, all architects love it because the building is an exhibit of pieces of architecture from antiquity on, and it's like a Victorian house where you put everything in; it doesn't focus on one work. When we show contemporary work, we focus on one series of works, objects or paintings. And this is more like salon hanging, where you hang a wall with fifty paintings. It's more in the spirit of that, and we've lost that, I think. When they do exhibitions of my work, I bring that back. I always put all the models in so that there's a roadmap as to the direction I took: how I went from one model to the next to the next. I think it's something that should be revisited as an idea for showing contemporary art. Some artists could do it.

You once said that it's often almost like an oxymoron: two opposite things in one – the very personal aesthetic for the shell and almost a counter-aesthetic for the interior. Is that the case here?

FG: It's kind of that, yeah. I'm not against rectilinear galleries at all. In fact, in Toronto we did only rectilinear galleries. And now in Abu Dhabi we're only making rectilinear galleries. The issue for me is, can you make rectilinear galleries that have passion, feeling, and are not sterilized

containers? Many of the galleries in Chelsea, the new white galleries, are sterilized containers – and many of the galleries that have been built in London and New York for museums. When you walk into a room, there's a feeling of the space and then you put art in it and the art is enhanced by the feeling of the space. When the feeling of the space is sterile, then you have to fight that to see the art. It's very subtle. I don't think everybody thinks about it that way, but that's how I think about it.

I remember there was a conversation you had with Philip Johnson where he said that the greatest buildings in history are one-room buildings and that's why a bigger building should just be a sequence of one-room buildings. Could you talk about this?

FG: Well, there are so many parts to that question. First of all, there's the discussion that goes on all the time about whether one is an architect or an artist or whether you're both at the same time. It's a stupid discussion because obviously in history there are people who are both, like Borromini and Michelangelo. In the contemporary world, the press and artists, everybody, they've divided this thing into two systems: one has plumbing and the other is pure. Since I love art and since I don't claim to be an artist, I don't care to have that title. I care to have the title of architect. But what interests me – and I've talked about this before – is the moment of truth. Take the simplest example of a painter: you have a white canvas, a brush and a palette of colours and you look at this white canvas and now you've got to make a mark. And I call that the moment of truth. It's clean and pure. It's direct. It's hand-eye coordination, it's the brain, it's your thoughts, it's millions of years of the history of art packed into your brain, and it's what you had for breakfast and whether your kids were a pain in the ass, and all kinds of stuff. So that first moment is a moment of truth. And I kept looking for the analogy in architecture, because in architecture you can hide behind so many things. You can complain: 'Well, the client wanted this. I didn't want to do it but I had to' or 'The building department wouldn't let me do this' or 'The budget wouldn't let me do this.' So you have an excuse mantra that's two miles long if you want to use it to explain why the building looks

like it does. I was looking in my own psyche and in my own life for the moment of truth where you're clean of all that; where you can't hide. I don't want to hide. I just want to get out there. I don't want to have any reasons. I've got to keep the rain out, maybe, but I only want very simple reasons, so it's not cluttered. And Philip Johnson gave a lecture in which he talked about one-room buildings being the greatest buildings of all time. And that's it! 'You gotta just make the one room.' And so I started thinking of that as the moment of truth in architecture. I was just doing houses at the time. So I took each room and made it a one-room building and then put them together. And then I realized I was doing Morandi, and Aldo Rossi was talking about still lifes and it all clicked for me that this was the way to find this moment of truth in architecture. And I still think about things that way. The rooms are discrete and they're objects in their own right, but then they're part of a continuum, part of a bigger picture.

I was wondering also about the role of chance. I spoke to Gerhard Richter a couple of weeks ago about John Cage and we talked about the role of chance in his painting process. And I was wondering, when you go from maquette to maquette and suddenly subtract something, what's the role of chance in that process?

FG: It's a big role because you're responding in real time to what you see. My favourite John Cage expression is: 'Not knowing cheers the knowing.' I think most of the great things that happen in the world happen by chance. They're based on intense study, intense explorations, sometimes conscious, but ... In the case of scientists, they know they want to find a cure for something, but to get from here to the cure involves millions of people, years of study. It's virtually impossible.

But chance plays a part?

FG: Scientists fall into things quite by chance. I've been involved with the Hereditary Disease Foundation for thirty-five years, and the way they talk about their work is very much like the way I think about my work. For example, if the person who commissioned the building comes in and says:

‘Well, it doesn’t feel right. Something’s wrong here’, then I’m willing to reopen the case and study it quickly and come up with a solution. I love that. I’m not threatened by that. Some of my colleagues fix the design and they stay there, and then if you try to change it they get nervous and are very rigid. I’ve never been like that. Now, some people get nervous when I do that, but that’s how I work best with people.

So it’s a feedback loop?

FG: Yeah.

Two final questions: the first is about the unrealized projects. Do you have any unbuilt roads, dreams, projects that have been too big to be realized?

FG: The only building that I’m sorry never got built was the Corcoran Museum in Washington. I really loved that design. In many ways, it was the beginnings of the direction that led to here, if you look at it. But generally, I don’t dwell on things like that. I try to look forward, because you can waste too much of your time crying over spilt milk. I don’t talk about the Corcoran because it was so painful.

My final question: Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a wonderful little book, which is advice to a young poet. I was wondering what, in 2009, would be your advice to a young architect?

FG: To be themselves. I always tell them that. When I have students, I have them write their signature. And then they compare signatures. And they always look different: my signature’s different from yours. And I say, ‘That’s the basic you. It’s not self-conscious, it’s not contrived. You just wrote your name the way you always write it. You’ve got to find yourself in your work that way. And when you find it, the good news is, you’re the only expert. And so it doesn’t matter what somebody else says.’ And I like that idea, and I’ve lived by that idea.

The architect’s responsibility

So, Frank, how did it all start? What was your epiphany?

FG: I was born in 1929 ... how far back do you want to go?

The beginning ...

FG: When I was eleven years old I went to a summer cottage in Canada with my parents and it was very modest; they were poor. And there was a woman who analysed handwriting at this cottage and she analysed my handwriting and told my mother I was going to be a famous architect. Now I only remembered that recently, because at that point I didn't know what an architect was, so to be a famous one didn't interest me very much.

My mother took me to classical music concerts and to art museums from an early age in Toronto, Canada, where we lived. And so I think the idea of culture was very much put into my DNA from the beginning. And to this day, I'm very interested in art, history, modern, contemporary, whatever, and as I get older, I am more and more involved with classical music.

Perhaps it's because of the kinds of projects I've had. It's hard to explain.

I was trained in city planning. Politically, I came from a very lefty socialist kind of family background, where my mother's family were all in Canada, and worked in the garment industry, sewing clothes, I guess. And they belonged to unions, so I was raised in this rather socialist thing, which is still in my DNA I think, and I respond to that knowing full well that sometimes it's counterproductive. This brought the idea of modesty in choice of materials and in expression and I know that some people, when I say that, would probably say, no, he's not about that. But what people probably don't know is those expressive buildings are inexpensive. They're not more expensive than buildings that may look plain. So I have a commitment to modesty and my generation of architects grew up viewing architecture as a dignified profession. We wouldn't hire public relations firms to represent us. We don't self-promote; that's my generation. I don't have pictures taken of my buildings, but it's all part of that sort of personal ethic – I don't mean to be holier than thou, believe me, I'm not pure or anything – but I think those issues are paramount. I wanted to do the good

things, do social planning ... I think today the issues are sustainability and trying to save our planet. If you research my generation of architects, like Richard Rogers and Foster and others, we've been talking about the sustainability issue since the 60s; nobody ever was interested in it. Respecting the planet was certainly part of our idea and still is.

I wanted to ask you about the connection to art, because I spoke with many artists about you and you've had dialogues with artists for a long time. I think you once told me that a real epiphany for you was when you met Rauschenberg for the first time, and that he was a great inspiration. Can you talk a little bit about your contact zone with art?

FG: Well, I was interested in art before architecture. I studied ceramics and art history at night school; I took classes and I went to many galleries to see art. When I did my first projects in LA, the architects were very upset. I don't know why, but there was something I was doing that wasn't kosher. And the artists embraced me, which was very nice, and so I decided that I was going to go for the love; it was normal, right? So I became friends with the artists and I hung out with all of them, with Larry Bell, etc. And the art dealers, Nicky Wilder, and through that, many of the New York artists came to LA, so I got to know Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg and Chamberlain and everybody. We hung out together socially and I spent time at Andy's factory with Viva and Ultraviolet. So it was like my family. The projects I was doing at the time architecturally were pretty low budget and you couldn't get craftsmanship in LA; they were building tract houses and there was no sense of pride of craft. And it was so frustrating that I decided to make something else. Some of this is related to seeing Rauschenberg make the Combines and doing things with trash, so to speak, and the way people were responding to it. Maybe instead of fighting the lack of craft, I was going to try to use it as a positive thing. Accept it and build with it. This is something that came out of those relationships. You know, when you're young and working in a field where you're not sure who you are, what you

are, what you're doing, to have colleagues like those artists supporting you was a big deal for me.

I was wondering how, then, the collaboration started, because it took a long time before you built your first museum. That started much later. I think the Weisman [Art] Museum was one of the first ones ...

FG: There's an interesting story about the museum. Do you know a guy, Benjamin Buchloh?

Of course, yes.

FG: And Michael Asher?

God, yes.

FG: They were part of a bunch of guys who used to hang out together. And when I built my house in '78 in Santa Monica they came to see it. It was during that time that they asked me – it was very serious, they got very serious – if I were given the chance to do an art museum, how would I design it? And so I said that of course the architecture should be subordinate to the art, the art should be first and the building should disappear, so the art stands out, and I thought they were going to say, 'Yes, that's right.' And they didn't. They started yelling at me and they said, 'You asshole, that's talking down to us, it's insulting, that suggests that we don't have any, you know ... we want you to do something that's inspirational, something that engages us, something that we can work against, work with, get involved with.' That was a very important mantra. Going forward, so when I started working on museums – I mean, everybody wants the white box – I was fortunate to have a funny client, Tom Krens, who was of the same mind as Benjamin Buchloh. He pushed me to do more with the buildings. And my experience since Bilbao is that artists are very appreciative of it, like it, and are very supportive of what we did there. The people who don't like it are the museum directors and curators. I don't know why. Maybe it's because it costs more money to install or something,

I don't know. And you see these endless museums that are made; that are so precious about sanctified space for the art, that they don't realize that this over-preciousness is toxic to art. You can see it in many museums where the building becomes so bloody precious that it does all the things these people say they want, but it's very toxic and the art looks less important.

Now, Picasso looks great wherever you put it; if you put it in my garage it would look great. So I think the art survives everybody, including me. This endless quest for architect neutrality may not be the answer; this is maybe something we should think about.

I was wondering about Bilbao; if you can tell us about the moment this idea came to you?

FG: It's maybe too long a story, but Krens invited me to Bilbao to talk about a museum in town on an existing site. Anyway, for a lot of reasons it wasn't the right thing to do and we found another site on the river, by this beautiful bridge, and that possibly was available.

When I got there, the shipping industry, the steel industry and a lot of the construction industry was in decline. People were leaving, the kids were leaving to go to other places, and the river was dirty; it was all kind of going downward.

The community, the Basque government, the president of the Basque government, the minister of commerce, the minister of culture and the minister of education and members of the community met with me and said they wanted the Sydney Opera House effect, which preceded the Bilbao effect by many years. There was purely a business interest, it was commerce driven; they wanted to change the economics of their country and they were committed to that and my building was the important first step.

So that was a heavy load, right? Fortunately, I had done a scheme for the competition before this heavy load was put on my head and that was done based on a sketch, almost the first day I was in Bilbao. Incorporating the river, the bridge, the nineteenth-century city, the relationship to the Town Hall, this is on a bend in the river, the thinking about the industries that

were in decline, the steel and shipping industries, shipbuilding and the technology that was available. This informed whatever sketches I did. I think the first drawing incorporates all of the issues that are in the final building, but I didn't know that, so I only looked at that first drawing after the building was finished. I said, 'Oh my God, why did it take so long?' I could've had it all from the beginning; but you don't recognize it, I think, in the beginning.

But do you think there is a link to automatic writing, because you once told me that you sort of always draw without taking the pen off the page; you just keep going, and is it somehow like automatic drawing, do you think?

FG: Yes, it's hand-to-eye coordination. It's your thoughts come through your hand. The drawings are always surprising after the fact. When I finished the first sketches, they looked like scribbles to me and I think if I showed them to anybody, they'd look like scribbles to them when they see them in relation to the finished building. It is a kind of an intuitive working out, visually, in relation to an informed brain; you're informed by a lot of stuff that comes out intuitively. I think if I knew what I was going to do before, I wouldn't do it because that is already in the past. And I've talked to a lot of artists about that and they feel very much the same in that they don't predict, they work intuitively, they respond to a time. And most of us are fairly well educated in the arts and in politics and in literature, etc., so all of that impacts the way you express yourself.

I think I'm like a vacuum cleaner; I pick up everything. I'm curious about a lot of things and I think the immediacy of painting has always intrigued me. Even Rembrandt – if you looked at a Rembrandt, you feel like it was just painted yesterday. There's that immediacy, and I've always been interested in how to achieve this in construction. How do you translate that, how do you get that feeling of frozen motion that exists in the Elgin Marbles, or that exists in the Indian Shiva figures? I always felt that that immediacy was more powerful than nineteenth-century decoration, so all this kind of stuff seemed irrelevant in our time. That made sense back then,

but now it doesn't, not to me. How do you replace it? I found it in painting; I found that I'm very moved by de Kooning brushstrokes or by the great paintings. Yesterday, we were shown Leonardo's original drawings at the Accademia; the director let me sit this close to them. That's pretty powerful stuff, you know, to come down through the centuries. So that's the inspiration, that's what I'm searching for. I mean, if anything is a passion, it's to try and figure out how to build with bricks and mortar and achieve that immediacy.

And can you maybe tell us more about the extraordinary tower which is the centre of the LUMA/Parc des Ateliers project, the heart, the centre point? You said that it somehow had something to do with Les Alpes and Van Gogh?

FG: It's dangerous to make references to specific artists and say I'm inspired by that or this, because then it opens the question absolutely at this point and you would say Van Gogh's painting is a million times better than that. So I don't want to presume.

My inspiration is, first of all, this is an industrial complex that's been left to disintegrate. I mean, it's had its day and now it's kind of old and forlorn. And it's being regenerated for a very noble kind of purpose. And it has its aesthetic there and one can tart it up and make it look like this room, but that wouldn't be very ... first of all, it would be very expensive to do and it wouldn't be of our time and it wouldn't be, in my opinion, productive. A lot of art – like at MASS MoCA [Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art] or when I did the Temporary Contemporary – is shown in industrial buildings and has survived. And most artists' studios are in industrial buildings, and the art looks usually better in their studios than it does in these sterilized galleries.

So it would be my tendency to go with the flow. I do look at industrial materials. I was fascinated with this aluminium, for the last maybe ten years I had pieces of it. I never had an opportunity to play with it; it's used in the military to defuse blasts in Humvee cars. And it hasn't found its way into the general construction industry. Maja Hoffmann saw me experimenting

with it and liked it; it made sense in terms of its toughness and character in relation to the industrial project. And so we started experimenting with it as an exterior material. It's very light, it gives a sense of mass without paying the price of a sense of mass; all buildings, the vapour barrier is behind the exterior skin. So it's not meant to keep the water out, it's just to protect the inner skin. And, we started experimenting with it on this building, and we still are, it's not quite finished. But slowly it's arriving; I don't know how else to explain it. Does that make sense?

One thing I keep thinking about is this idea of a 'living organism'. I remember Maja [saying] that somehow this idea of a living organism is a driving metaphor for the whole project and I wanted to speak more about this with you. Freeman Dyson said on January 1st, 2000, that the third millennium will be biological. We now have all these scientific inventions and there is synthetic biology and more and more it seems to be the case that this is a very biologically driven time. Biology and organic matter and forms have been prevalent in your work for a long time. I mean, it goes from very obvious things like animal shapes and the fish, to other, more subtle things like the way things are organized, perhaps referring to living systems. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about this idea of the living organism to describe maybe the balance between form and function necessary to achieve such viability? And also maybe how the ordering of the elements within the project can contribute to this kind of vitality

...

FG: Well, when you talk about living organisms you're talking, for me, more or less about human nature, which is not perfect. And what we do is always, in some ways, a work in progress; so it's not a finite, finished end, it's a beginning. Now, ironically, these cells may engender living organisms, we're not sure what's going to happen in them. We're studying what it means to have something come into being. In the case of this building, things will happen we cannot control. Obviously it will retain water in those

little places, and when you have water, things grow in them. I hope not mosquitoes but ... We're studying all the possibilities, so before we use it, we'll know.

But I think the issue is to make buildings that are not precious. I think most people will understand that as soon as you get something very precious, then you feel like, as time changes, you can't do anything to it. You're stuck. Our culture becomes absorbed in preservation. And it seems to be counterproductive to the way we really live, the movement, the temporariness of our daily existence that moves in and out of things, faster, and more often ... so the building shouldn't become precious.

And my whole attitude about detailing and materiality and the way things are built is about looking for that immediacy. You can move this; you can cut a hole here if you need to put a light there. And it's open-ended, and I think that for me represents a respect for other people, that you respect the people that you're living with, that are going to use the building. You respect the future, you know that there's going to be change and I don't want to imprison somebody in an artifact just because of my ego. I don't think that's necessary. I can go with the flow; I'm curious about my client's interventions, I'm curious about how they'll live with the space, and what they'll do to it.

So I try not to design every piece of furniture. I came into a tradition where Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe designed even the location of the chairs in relation to the building. I found that not interesting for me; beautiful, very beautiful, very inspirational, but not interesting to be living in it, not interesting to be confronted with it on a daily basis. So that's how I think about it, as a living organism.

I did want to ask you also about your links with literature because you also talk a lot about Joyce. And actually there is this great anecdote published in Rolling Stone about you and the hip-hop artist Jay-Z.

FG: Who?

He's a hip-hop artist, Jay-Z, whom it seems you sent the collected works of Joyce to.

FG: Oh, Jay-Z.

Yes, apparently you told him that basically, for you, rap started with Joyce.

FG: Actually, I sat next to him at a lunch; and I was told he was a rapper. And I asked him who the first rapper was. And he said Bibbity-Boo and Bibitty-Bee and da-da-da-da, and I didn't know who they were. And I asked him if he would consider James Joyce. And he looked at me and said, 'Who's that?' So I sent him the complete works of James Joyce. And I found a recording of Joyce himself reading *Finnegans Wake*, which is available to everybody. And then six months later I ran into him and asked him what he thought about it. And he said, 'Oh, I haven't paid attention to it yet.' So then by accident I met a young man named Bono, who's Irish, who loves Joyce, who's a friend of Jay-Z's. And I told him the story; he called Jay-Z and made him read the damn stuff.

But then you wonder where Joyce got this rap style and you think about the litany in the Church, right; it's very rap, kind of. So rap has a lineage. Very interesting ...

I've got two last questions about the art project and then a couple of general questions. One of the things I was curious about is the connections between mountain and architecture. Josiah McElheny just curated a show in New York about this whole relationship, looking at Bruno Taut and Hermann Finsterlin. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that, and maybe you are interested in Finsterlin?

FG: Well, Philip Johnson is the one who introduced me to Finsterlin, actually. Philip was an amazing scholar, which hopefully will come out over time. And he was always showing me things that I didn't know about. Philip did a small guesthouse for a project that I invited him to do a cameo on. He came in with this beautiful *model* and I thought, 'My God, this guy's

amazing.' I ask myself, 'How did he get this thing?' And I started asking him about it and he very cavalierly gave me the Finsterlin book and there it was, he just copied it.

But I would have to say no. Finsterlin was not really an influence. The guy that more interested me that way was Erich Mendelsohn. I wonder what would have happened if he'd had the computers that we have now? He would have certainly pre-empted me fifty years ago with his work. He was already trying to express motion in building. People should go see his Einstein Tower in Potsdam, because with one building and the placement of the building and the context, he showed the way to interact with an environment; with a context. His work was totally different, totally expressive, totally unique and yet inclusive. And that one building, that simple little tower, is so powerful in that respect. It's very inspirational.

I actually met Mendelsohn when I was a student; he came to my school. He was very arrogant; that was a time when architects were arrogant. Frank Lloyd Wright was terrible. I went to Taliesin West with my family, driving back from graduate school. And we drove up and we came to the gate, and the flag was up that Frank Lloyd Wright was there. I was so excited. They asked for one dollar per person to go in and I told them to forget it, and I left.

Wonderful. I have a few very last questions which are more general. I thought I'd pick up your Proust idea and end this with an adapted Proust questionnaire. I was wondering, what is your dream of happiness?

FG: Well, it's right now, it's not later, and it's right now, now. I'm not feeling too good right now, because I have a cold. But I've been enjoying the people and the environment you're in and certainly coming here at the time of the Biennale when lots of other architects are here and lots of friends. That's happiness.

What role does chance play?

FG: Well, I embrace chance because, as I said before, it's an intuitive response to the issues that I'm confronted with, to make a building.

What's your motto?

FG: Motto? I don't have a motto but I have a thing I believe in. As an architect I believe in responsibility. I mean, architecture is a service business. I had a meeting with a bunch of scientists recently and I talked about it that way. And they said science is a service business also. So we are like Michelangelo and Pope Julius, we're commissioned to do something. And so there has to be a respect for the commissioner. And so you have to choose the commissioners you want to work with.

The other thing is to respect their financial constraints on the particular project. And that's a really big deal for me because I take pride in that, in being able to do that, to achieve an interesting building within those constraints.

And the other is to deliver something that technically works.

So in a way that's my motto or ethos.

What ought to change? What should change?

FG: In the world, what should change? Well, there's a lot. We've just been through a reprise of what happens in the world. If you read *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, every fifty years a new emperor comes to power. They create games, they create a war, and this went on through time. And it's still happening, the idea that we spent billions of dollars in Iraq when, if those billions of dollars had been given like the Marshall Plan to help the people of Iraq, it would have been more effective. We make people hate us more by what we do, by those actions.

So the generation of hatred seems to be pervasive. And in the US, with the Tea Parties and all this bullshit that's going on, you ask yourself what you should be doing. What should an American do if Sarah Palin becomes the president? I'm going to go back to Canada.

Dan Graham once told me one should never underestimate Canada.

What's your smallest work and what's your biggest work?

FG: Well, the smallest work is definitely the jewellery because it really is. I think the biggest work is just continuing to work, continuing to survive. Also important for me is managing the kind of collaborative group that works in my office and doing it efficiently.

Renzo Piano once said that what he loves about your buildings is their energy. So what is energy?

FG: Well, energy is something we exchange with each other, and, so, positive, kind of. Hopefully, the things you do and say that generate other people's thinking, through the ages. That's the energy that is very important.

And what have you learned from travelling?

FG: I learned about jetlag.

Do politics and architecture mingle?

FG: Yes, they inevitably do. I think, I've said this before, that the messiness of the modern city reflects our politics, reflects freedom, democracy; everybody has a right to do their own thing. And so it creates this kind of messy assemblage of good ideas, bad ideas, and so on. But I think it's very positive, and we should take energy from it, because it's the way we are. It reflects who we are and how we are.

We don't always like it, and there's a lot of denial about it. I'm very fascinated with denial, in myself and in the culture.

What kind of music do you mostly listen to?

FG: Oh, classical music a lot. Lately *Mother Goose*, Ravel, you know, and a lot of young composers that I hang out with, and some not so young.

Like Thomas Adès?

FG: Thomas, yes, and Esa-Pekka Salonen and Magnus Lindberg.

What's your favourite colour?

FG: Blue.

What's the role of chairs?

FG: Ah. The chair is the essence of design thinking because it's so impossible to create the perfect chair. It's got to be engineering perfect, it's got to be tactile perfect, comfort perfect, visually engaging, and it's got to be sustainable, and it's got to be around. And it's always got to be ... demountable, you know, stackable; whenever you go to design a chair, you get these great ideas and you go to factory and you meet with the guys. And you're all happy and everybody's excited and they say, 'Oh, it's not stackable; I'm sorry.'

Very last question: what is your dream for the twenty-first century?

FG: Well, I'd like to stay around a little longer. I'm starting to lose a lot of friends and getting a little nervous. I would also like it if all the bad things we were talking about before could be removed from our lives.

GERHARD RICHTER

I was seventeen when I met Gerhard Richter in 1985, and I have never stopped talking to him. I have learned so many things from Richter – how to make books and exhibitions, how to think about art. He's been like a mentor to me. When we first began to have more formal, recorded conversations, I thought, 'How do I prepare for this?' Richter is constantly interviewed and written about, not to mention writing himself. When I'm recording a conversation with an artist, I want to have read everything that they have read or discussed, as well as every interview ever given, because I want to try to address subjects with them that haven't been previously addressed.

So here, with Richter, I focus on him as an architect, an artist interested in series and cycles, and then we talk about all of his books, an important part of his practice (and of many artists and architects) that is often overlooked. We talked about his entire range of work through this prism, making it an interview he had never previously given ...

Daily practice of paint

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *You were uncertain about these 'Notes from 1962', but you agreed to their reprint in the book nevertheless [The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962–1993, 1995].*

GERHARD RICHTER: Yes, it all sounds rather sententious and stilted.

It begins like this: 'The first impulse towards painting ... stems from the need to communicate.'

GR: That's certainly not wrong, but it's a bit of a truism.

In the same text, you dissociate yourself firmly from the idea of 'art for art's sake'. Against that, you emphasize the idea of content – not imposed content, but also not content infiltrated through the back door, of the kind you hear of nowadays.

GR: That was an idea that was current in the East [Germany] in the 50s, a kind of ritual abuse of decadent, bourgeois art. Somehow or other I had managed to internalize the idea that art can't be 'art for art's sake', but has to be about communication; I later said the same thing in a different way.

The repetition from one text to another brings out certain basic structures in your thinking, such as your aversion to ideologies.

GR: That's probably innate. By the age of sixteen or seventeen I was absolutely certain that there is no God – an alarming discovery to me, after my Christian upbringing. By that time, my fundamental aversion to all beliefs and ideologies was fully developed.

This runs like a scarlet thread, as it were, through all the texts.

GR: And on the other hand the knowledge that we need belief – which I sometimes refer to as a mania, an illusion that we need in order to survive

or to do anything, a prime mover. And at the same time this vulgar materialist view that we do not essentially differ from the animals, that there is no such thing as freedom or free will – this doesn't directly come out in the texts, but those convictions were established very early on.

That sounds fatalistic.

GR: So it may, but the important thing for me is that this kind of fatalism or negativism and pessimism is a useful strategy in life; there is a highly positive side to it because one has fewer illusions.

Hopeless, or inescapable?

GR: Either will do, to make us feel better, to make us create hope.

So hope is another scarlet thread?

GR: Hope is something I always have. And the less we deceive ourselves, the more pessimistically and fatalistically we see a thing, without kidding ourselves that we have free will, or that it is possible to move a pencil from left to right by our own autonomous decision, the more we shall succeed in not succumbing to false faiths.

The press invitation to the exhibition 'Life with Pop: Demonstration for Capitalist Realism' makes it clear that this was a unique event, a happening.

GR: And not the inauguration of an art movement.

More of a parody of all -isms.

GR: Perhaps.

In the course of your conversations and texts, the word 'readymade' turns up again and again, especially with Benjamin Buchloh, but also in more recent notes and interviews in which you speak of your 'Abstract Pictures' ['Abstraktes Bild' series, 1966–ongoing] as readymades – which is taking things as far as

Duchamp's statement that the readymade concept expands to include the entire universe.

GR: I do believe in the readymade in this overriding sense, because if you confine it to art alone it tends to turn glib and illustrative: [Piero Manzoni's] *Base of the World* [1961] was one example of that.

Besides the 'Demonstration for Capitalist Realism', were there other, similar projects that never came off?

GR: Any amount of them. In Paris, on the roof of the [Les] Galeries Lafayette, we wanted to put up a photograph of the Alps, with a cut-out of the skyline, so that Paris could have its own Alps. And there are some lovely views in the Neanderthal area; we wanted to take people out there in buses and announce, 'Here is our art.' Others later did just that.

On the one hand, there was this ubiquitous reference to pop art: existing and available images were taken out of context, appropriated and recombined. But on the other hand, the 'Demonstration' also reveals a connection with happenings and actionism.

GR: That's what fascinated me most, at that time. For instance, we were obsessed with the idea of holding an exhibition of Lichtenstein paintings, all of which we would paint ourselves. But that turned out to be too much work.

This scepticism about the ideas of authorship and genius has led to a number of attempts to deconstruct the modernist claim to originality and authorship, by simply appropriating someone else's work without permission.

GR: A terrible cop-out. Especially when a person builds his whole life on it. To do it once, as a demonstration, that I can understand.

In your response to pop art at the time, were you already distancing yourself from it, or were you involved in adopting or

appropriating it as a movement?

GR: My distancing was mostly about 'good' and 'bad', and the idea didn't interest me for long anyway. And nothing has changed, really. I always thought that some were bad and some not very good, and the best were Warhol, Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg. And that's the way it still is.

The 'Demonstration for Capitalist Realism' was an exercise in brinkmanship: it came close to a point where art dissolves into its social or political context, so that convergence must either take the form of disappearance or of a clash. And as to contextual convergence: the happening took place in a furniture store, and it left the existing display unchanged. Art converged with a pre-existing context, but it was never about art dissolving into the context of life.

GR: Yes, we were rather playing with fire – to find out just how far we could go with the destruction of art. But in principle I never had the remotest desire to allow painting or art to dissolve into anything else. That kind of radicalism made no sense to me at all, though radicalism was generally regarded as the be-all and end-all at that time.

As a criterion of quality?

GR: No, art was the most important quality. That's why I then made fun of it all in the 'Polke/Richter' text for Hanover ['Polke/Richter', Galerie h, Hanover, 1966], and said that I was conventional and loved Raphael and beautiful paintings.

Were you conscious then of these distinct positions?

GR: Yes, of course I was, and sometimes I had a guilty conscience about not being quite radical enough.

Not even in the 'Demonstration for Capitalist Realism'?

GR: When you're doing something like that, you tend to get high on it and just do it. But then when you're making something of your own again, or

thinking over how terrifically radical other people are – Pollock’s drip paintings, or Carl Andre’s metal plates, or Arman with his containers: now that was regarded as radical. And I’ve never seen myself that way; I’ve always painted.

In spite of your constant dialogue and exchange of information with Sigmar Polke and [Konrad] Fischer, the mechanisms of group bonding were never formalized, as they were for instance with art and language.

GR: That was quite deliberate. There were rare and exceptional moments when we were doing something together and forming a kind of impromptu community; the rest of the time we were competing with each other.

There’s this text lifted from a newspaper, on a poster for Galerie Friedrich and Dahlem [Munich].

GR: Now that was a readymade, wasn’t it?

Your only textual readymade known to me, except for the Perry Rhodan composite in the Galerie h catalogue, and your non-statement in the book by Herzogenrath.

GR: To me it was just the same as a found photograph. But I don’t think anyone wiggled out, because it was on the poster and just disappeared. Later I often tried out texts or text montages of the same kind.

How did the Perry Rhodan text collage come about?

GR: We’d read the stuff, and it fit into the utopian naivety of the 60s, with all those ideas about other planets. This inartistic, popular quality – it all went together with photographs, magazines, glossies, that was the pop side of it. All completely unimaginable today.

Another absurdist text is Polke’s imaginary Richter/Thwaites interview from 1964. The term ‘pop painter’ turns up – was it meant ironically, or did you all then define yourselves as the German representatives of pop art?

GR: It was meant ironically; at that point, we were trying to keep our distance from pop. It was only at the very beginning that we were naive enough to go off with Konrad Fischer and do the rounds of the galleries, Sonnabend and Iris Clert, and announce, 'We are the German pop artists.'

But did the use of existing images and texts come from the influence of pop? It freed available, popular images from their contexts and saw them in a new way as pictures in new combinations.

GR: Yes, of course, but maybe that can also be seen as the time-honoured practice of taking something over, setting it in a new context, and so forth. Nothing new, really.

In your texts and interviews, the word 'Informel' turns up repeatedly. You don't categorically reject it, but you draw a clear line of demarcation between Art Informel and realism. At the same time, your work is a kind of reaction against the then dominant stylistic and mannerist games of the Informel and Tachist schools, which arose from automatism – and the term 'Informel' stands for the exploitation of that potential. What does the word 'Informel' mean to you today?

GR: As I see it, all of them – Tachists, Action Painters, Informel artists and the rest – are only part of an Informel movement that covers a lot of other things too. I think there's an Informel element in Beuys, as well; but it all began with Duchamp and chance, or with Mondrian, or with the Impressionists. Art Informel is the opposite of the constructional quality of classicism – the age of kings, of clearly formed hierarchies.

So in that context you still see yourself as an Informel artist?

GR: Yes, in principle. The age of the Informel has hardly begun yet.

And this landscape here? [Gestures]

GR: This is Informel, in spite of all the structure, which has a rather nostalgic look to it.

Although there's no leading idea, no leitmotif, there's no uncontrolled use of chance either. In your pictures, chance never takes the decisions; at most, chance asks the questions.

GR: It's the found object, which you then accept, alter or even destroy – but always control. The process of generating the chance event can be as planned and deliberate as you like.

You talk about the photographs everyone takes and their function as cult objects. The banal source images reveal an unexpected, lasting, universal pictorial quality. When you said that, were you exploring the possible legitimization of illegitimate pictures – an 'illegitimate art', as Pierre Bourdieu called it?

GR: The legitimate pictures are the photographs – the devotional pictures that people hang or set up in their homes. We then sometimes use them for art, and that may well be illegitimate.

In the same notes you also say that a photograph can be seen as a picture, outside the categories of 'high' and 'low', ritual photography and art. This is an important difference between you and Polke, isn't it, your refusal to go for darkroom manipulations?

GR: That's more of a technical, formal point; it's not that significant. I just don't like being in darkrooms. But to go back to legitimization: perhaps it's also illegitimate to bring the snapshot form too close to the readymade. Photographs are only readymades because they're so easy to produce, in comparison with painstakingly hand-painted pictures; as with a readymade, you only have to select them. The whole distinction is a rather shaky one, because it may well turn out that there are no such things as readymades at all. There are only pictures, which have value to many people or to very

few, which remain interesting for a very long time or only for a few seconds, and for which very little or a very great deal is paid.

So the people who take the snaps are artists.

GR: Yes, and when I then paint another picture of Uncle Rudi [*Onkel Rudi*, 1965], the little officer, I'm actually watering down: the true work of art is achieved by those two or three private individuals who put Rudi behind glass and stood him on the sideboard or hung him on the wall. The only sense in which I'm not watering it down is that by painting the thing I am giving it rather more universality.

The displacement makes it exemplary.

GR: Yes, and blurring was the only way of getting this done quickly. The photorealists later painted photographs in a finicky, detailed way. I haven't the patience for that; and then there are the distracting perceptual factors that find their way in. One is the outsize format, and the other is admiration of the labour involved: the fact that it takes a whole year, the response of marvelling at the way it looks 'just like a photo'. I wanted to avoid all that by cheapening the production values. You can see that a photograph is meant, but it hasn't been laboriously copied and duplicated. This worked, and the pictures had the basic resemblance to photography without looking like copies of photographs.

You also talk about photography as drawing – or as the camera obscura, which Vermeer used – in the sense of being a preliminary stage in the production of a picture. This reverses the primacy of photography, which is supposed to have given rise to modernism by breaking down barriers. You simply use the photograph, in making the picture, as a matter of course.

GR: In the traditional practice of painting, that's the first step. In the past, painters went out into the open air and sketched. We take snapshots. It's also meant to counter the tendency to take photography too seriously, all that 'second-hand world' stuff, which is wholly unimportant to me. Many

critics thought that my art was a critique of contemporary life: criticizing it for being cut off from direct experience. But that was never what I meant.

The camera crops an image. It doesn't give the one, absolute image. The selected, partial image pushes forward and simultaneously recedes.

GR: It has often been said that my pictures look like details. That may be so, but I can't understand it, probably because I take it too much for granted already. But maybe it was meant to refer to a certain inconclusive, open-ended quality: pictures that are cropped on four sides can never show anything but sections, details.

And each time just one of many possibilities.

GR: There are exceptions, of course, where it isn't one of many possibilities at all – as in the Betty portrait [Betty, 1988] or the Ema nude [Ema (Nude on a Staircase); Ema (Akt auf einer Treppe), 1966]. Those works tend towards the masterpiece, and if they aren't masterpieces it's just because I know that that just won't do; it's only ever like a quotation of a masterpiece, perhaps. But in principle everything is a detail.

In Betty and Ema the masterpiece status just seems to creep in – I was also thinking of Cathedral Corner [Domecke, 1987].

GR: But it can also happen with a Grey Picture ['Graue Bilder' series, 1968–ongoing]. On a museum wall there's something masterpiece-like about it: the way it's hung.

And the other 'Abstract Pictures'?

GR: I might include pictures like Janus [1983] and Juno [1983], for instance. But maybe only because they have such beautiful titles. There are some.

The masterpiece is the utter antithesis of the anecdote. And of the detail, and of the sequence. On the one hand, you talk about the impossibility of absolute painting; on the other, you bring back the concept of the masterpiece.

GR: Perhaps that's what one is always striving for, the masterpiece; it's just that it never is one. The masterpiece seems so far outside time that one can't even strive to attain it.

In the German dictionary of the Brothers Grimm, 'masterpiece' is defined as 'an excellent, artistically perfect picture'. In his book Überwindung der Kunst [The Way beyond Art, 1947], Alexander Dörner tells of a survey to find the criteria that defined the most popular pictures. The result is imaging. People buy colour reproductions and posters based on the following criteria: 1) pictorial depth – a concept derived from centralized perspective; 2) narrative content.

GR: There's not much of either quality in Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. In that case, it's 'The Vincent Van Gogh Story' that seems to be most important. And the whole masterpiece debate is relativized by the fact that the pictures we now regard as masterpieces may well have been the perfectly ordinary consumer art of their own day.

The Mona Lisa had its aura, even in Leonardo's lifetime. That kind of premonition of the enduring quality of work is a well-known phenomenon.

GR: But at that time the word 'master' itself had a different meaning, which had far more to do with craftsmanship.

In London the Betty portrait suddenly achieved enduring, universal, almost absolute quality; and curiously enough the same thing applied to the wider response that it got as a poster on the Underground. The masterpiece always implies this movement; you say it and then you take it back. It is one, and at the same time, it isn't.

GR: It's slightly refracted by the historical or nostalgic effect.

The discussion of works and artists' positions, which are important to you, comes to a head in the Buchloh interview [in

Gerhard Richter Paintings, 1988], with a kind of reconstruction of your view of the history of art. In a much earlier interview, you mentioned Barnett Newman as representative of a historical position, and Gilbert & George as contemporaries.

GR: Barnett Newman was always important. He came to me straight after Mondrian and Pollock. Newman was an ideal, because he created these big, clear, sublime fields that I could never have managed. He was my complete opposite.

Did your kinship with Gilbert & George lie in a shared interest and wish for normality at that time, the idea of disappearing into a completely banal life?

GR: I liked them as outsiders, above all. At that time, minimalism, land art and conceptual art were dominant. I valued all that, though I had very little to do with it. With Gilbert & George, too, I liked the very nostalgic side. They were the first people who liked my landscapes. I think what impressed me the most was the way they took their own independence as a matter of course.

Not forcing pictures into the dogmatic modernist straitjacket?

GR: The ideological straitjacket. Perhaps I have a kind of immunity to ideologies and fashions, because movements have always passed me by: the Nazi period, socialism, rock – and all the other fashions that made up the zeitgeist in thought, attitudes, dress, haircuts and all the rest. To me it all seemed intimidating rather than attractive.

You never mention Magritte.

GR: He's too popular, too pretty for me: wonderful calendar art, village schoolmaster's art. *La Trahison des images* [1928–9], 'This is not a pipe': to me, that's just not a very important piece of information.

What seems important to me is his recurrent doubt as to the names of things.

GR: Perhaps it got excluded because I could already see that I was in danger of painting something a bit too popular. I notice that at exhibitions: I get a very good reaction. The doormen and cleaning ladies think it's all great, even the 'Abstract Pictures'. It's actually the ideal state of affairs, if you do something that everyone likes.

The modernist rejection of any 'art for all' sprang from a feeling of resentment, because painting had lost all of its representational functions to photography.

GR: The image of the artist as a misunderstood figure is abhorrent to me. I much prefer the high times, as in the Renaissance or in ancient Egypt, where art was part of the social order and was needed in the present. The suffering, unappreciated Van Gogh is not my ideal. I like Gustave Courbet better.

How important was Beuys to you?

GR: Mainly as a phenomenon and as a person. When I first saw the work, I wasn't all that interested; it was too eccentric for me. I'm increasingly in favour of the official, the classic, the universal.

Along with Manet and Ingres, Beuys is the only other artist who hangs in your studio.

GR: Because he still fascinates me as a person more than anyone else; that special aura of his is something I've never come across either before or since. The rest are far more ordinary. Lichtenstein and Warhol I can take in at a glance; they never had the dangerous quality that Beuys had.

In connection with the abstract paintings of the 80s, you bring the idea of chance into play once again. John Cage made chance operations out of methods based on uncertainty. But I never see chance in your work in terms of his interpretation of chance operations; you have less of the serial juggling with known elements, governed by the throw of a dice that was usual in conceptual art.

GR: Except for the 'Colour Charts'. Those were serial; I mixed the given colours and then placed them according to chance. I found it interesting to tie chance to a wholly rigid order.

That means giving it a form.

GR: An architect once asked me what was so good about the 'Colour Charts' – what was supposed to be the art in them. I tried to explain to him that it had cost me a great deal of work to develop the right proportions and give it the right look.

To give it a form, in other words.

GR: Yes, because there would have been other possible ways of realizing the idea. I could paint these biscuits here in different colours and throw them across the room, and then I would have 1,024 colours in a chance form. Or in the 'Grey Pictures': if I had painted those because I couldn't think of anything else and because it was all meaningless anyway, then I might just as well have spilled the paint out on the street, or done nothing at all.

The later 'Abstract Pictures' also evoke the idea of the picture as a 'model'. Is that meant in a Mondrian-like sense?

GR: This was something that came up in an interview with Buchloh: the idea that Mondrian's paintings might be understood as social models of a non-hierarchical, egalitarian world. Perhaps that was what prompted me to see my own 'Abstract Pictures' as models, not of an egalitarian world but of a varied and constantly changing one. But fortunately Mondrian's paintings are not read as models of society. Their most important quality is a very different one. It would be terrible if [Mondrian's] *Broadway Boogie Woogie* painting [1942–3] were a model of society; there would be 'the Yellows, the Reds and the Blues', all moving ahead in straight lines.

In 1973, Roland Barthes wrote, 'To be modern is to know what is no longer possible.'

GR: What is no longer possible is everything that has already been said, and all the attendant stupidities of substance and form, pseudo-intelligent messages and dishonest intentions. If you try to avoid all that, it's hard at first, but eventually it works.

This avoidance is something you once described as 'escape'; and in your earlier pictures this referred mainly to the choice of motifs.

GR: Like Beuys's hare. He was always on the run too; how shall I put it: escaping from falsehood is always a good starting point.

It seems to me that this idea of escape is always cropping up in the present-day world. It's an escape that faces the fact: neither a nostalgic escape into the past nor a utopian escape into the future.

GR: I hope so. Although it does create more uncertainty, because the utopian or nostalgic escapees are always the ones who have the advantage of knowing where they're going.

Uncertainty as the diametrical opposite of the controlled working plan?

GR: Basically, yes: though the whole thing may seem fairly professional, it isn't, because it is not planned and controlled: it just happens.

Whistler's 'Art happens.'

GR: Or Buren's 'It rains, it snows, it paints.'

In your ongoing collection of photographs Atlas [c.1962–ongoing] there are sketches and designs for rooms that reveal an effort to find a place to fit the pictures, to create a kind of site-specific quality.

GR: That sort of thing only works in sketches, because the execution would be unendurable, overblown and bombastic. But it was good to design

sanctuaries of that kind, for pictures with an incredible total effect.

Utopian spaces?

GR: And megalomaniacal ones.

What works of yours exist in public space? The Underground station in Duisburg; the Hypo-Bank in Düsseldorf?

GR: And *Victoria* [*Victoria I* and *II*, 1986], two large-format works in an insurance company's [office]. The *Two Yellow Strokes* [1980] are in a school. That's all, almost. And at BMW, rather badly hung, there are three large canvases: red, yellow, blue, each one three metres high by six metres wide – as an enlargement.

Commissioned works ...

GR: Yes, sometimes I've enjoyed doing commissioned work, in order to discover something that I wouldn't have found of my own accord. And so, when Siemens commissioned my first *Townscape*, that led to all the 'Townscapes' [series, 1968–ongoing] that followed. It's also very nice when pictures have a known place to go to.

You've always made it a point of principle not to control where your pictures go, not to decide where and how they are hung.

GR: Let them go unconditionally. They need no precautions. If they're any good, they'll always find the right place; if they're not, they'll end up in the basement, and rightly so. Just imagine Giacometti making stipulations of that kind! I'm glad he didn't, so that his sculptures can be shown differently each time, now in Denmark; now in Stuttgart. Every time they look different, and yet they always stay the same. There are some frightful instances of artists who have created these imperishable monuments for themselves. A certain Herr Diefenbach, for instance, on Capri. Embarrassing.

There are some positive examples: the Segantini Museum, the Rothko Chapel, Walter de Maria's Earth Rooms [1968; 1974;

1977].

GR: And his *Lightning Field* [1971–7]. And all those beautiful churches, of course – there it has worked wonderfully well.

The works have lasted through time, thanks to their symbiotic relationship with the space.

GR: We're a long way away from that at the moment. Jannis Kounellis, in that curious conversation he had with Beuys, Anselm Kiefer and Enzo Cucchi [*Ein Gespräch*, 1986], talked about building a cathedral. Simulated presence. It's sometimes done for reasons of art politics, when galleries and curators want to force something through and set up artificial monuments of that kind, full of pseudo-masterpieces.

It seems to me more important than ever that there are some places where one can go and pay a visit to works – the way I visit your Baader-Meinhof work [October 18, 1977, 1988], in Frankfurt from time to time.

GR: Not that that's an ideal museum, exactly. But I know what you mean.

When I saw your room in Kassel ('A room of paintings', documenta IX, Kassel, 1992), I wondered at first whether the wood was chosen by you, whether it was taking up something that is implicit in the pavilion architecture. The wood might be part of a prefabricated kit, and it ironically forces the whole thing almost down to the level of a neat domestic interior. At the same time, it strongly emphasizes the break with the White Cube formula.

GR: It was Paul Robbrecht who suggested the wood panelling. The obligatory white walls date back only sixty or eighty years.

The only other place where I've seen that kind of floor-to-ceiling hanging in relation to your work is in your own studio.

GR: It only works in small spaces, on the private side. Whenever I've tried it on a temporary partition in a big exhibition, it's never worked.

What surprised me in Kassel was the flower piece [Flowers (Blumen), 1992]. Was that painted after your visit to Japan?

GR: Yes, perhaps that trip did have some influence: it affected those vertical scraped stripe paintings, too.

The flower piece has remained unique in your work. But at the time it put me in mind of a cycle. It could be a starting point.

GR: I have tried painting photographs of flowers since then, but there's nothing suitable. And when I tried to paint the flowers themselves, that didn't work either, unfortunately. I should have remembered that it hardly ever works for me to take a photograph in order to use it for a painting. You take a photograph for its own sake, and then later, if you're lucky, you discover it as the source of a picture. It seems to be more a matter of chance, taking a shot with the specific quality that's worth painting. The same happened with the *Cathedral* picture. I took the photograph in 1984. I was not in the best of moods at that time. And when I painted it, three years later, I went on to photograph some other 'cathedral corners' of the same kind – but I didn't get one usable shot. The state of mind counts for a lot ...

... a state that is specific to a time ...

GR: ... and makes you receptive to something. If I went to that cathedral now, I wouldn't know what to photograph. There's no reason why, and I can't force it. I even went all the way to Greenland, because Caspar David Friedrich painted that beautiful picture of *The Wreck of the Hope* [1824]. I took hundreds of photographs up there and barely one picture came out of it. It just didn't work.

So the 'quest for the motif' has very seldom led you to a picture?

GR: The quest for the motif is strictly for the professionals. On the other hand, when I sit down somewhere out there, more or less aimlessly and not looking for the motif, then all of a sudden the thing I've not been looking for may open up. That's good.

The flower piece in particular raises the issue of the experiential reality of nature, which is no longer a direct experience of nature.

GR: Because the flowers are cut and stuck into a vase ...

... or because it happens via the photograph.

GR: I think that's less important, because directly painted flowers would be no less artificial. Everything is artificial. The bunch of flowers, the photograph – it's all artificial. There's nothing new about that.

Or, to turn it round again: the Demiurge and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of nature. The painter goes into nature and sees it as a picture created by him.

GR: A nice idea, and one that's absolutely right, not only for painters, but for everyone. We make our own nature, because we always see it in the way that suits us culturally. When we look on mountains as beautiful, although they're nothing but stupid and obstructive rock piles; or see that silly weed out there as a beautiful shrub, gently waving in the breeze: these are just our own projections, which go far beyond any practical, utilitarian values.

When did you first use mirrors?

GR: In 1981, I think, for the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf ['Georg Baselitz/Gerhard Richter', Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1981]. Before that I designed a mirror room for Kasper König's 'Westkunst' show ['Westkunst: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939', Rheinhallen, Cologne, 1981], but it was never built. All that exists is the design, four mirrors for one room.

Your Kugel [Steel Balls, 1989] were also declared to be mirrors.

GR: It's strange about those *Steel Balls*, because I once said that a ball was the most ridiculous sculpture that I could imagine.

If one makes it oneself.

GR: Perhaps even as an object, because a sphere has this idiotic perfection. I don't know why I now like it.

What attracted me about my mirrors was the idea of having nothing manipulated in them. A piece of bought mirror, just hung there, without any addition, to operate immediately and directly. Even at the risk of being boring. Mere demonstration. The mirrors, and even more the *4 Panes of Glass* [1967], were also certainly directed against Duchamp, against his *Large Glass* [1915–23].

Duchamp comes back all the time, like a boomerang. You take up a position opposed to the complexity of the Large Glass, and straight away in comes the readymade idea as well.

GR: Maybe. But what interested me was going against all that pseudo-complexity. The mystery mongering, with dust and little lines and all sorts of other stuff on top, I don't like manufactured mystery.

In the 4 Panes of Glass, the artistic act was reduced to the most minimal level.

GR: Once again, I had to take the trouble of finding the right proportion, getting the right framework. Thus it is not a readymade, any more than Duchamp's *Large Glass* is.

Because so much work went into it.

GR: That's right. At one point, I nearly bought a readymade. It was a motor-driven clown doll, about 1.5 metres tall, which stood up and then collapsed into itself. It cost over six hundred [Deutsche] Marks at that time, and I couldn't afford it. Sometimes I regret not having bought that clown.

You would have exhibited it just like that, as an unaltered readymade?

GR: Just like that. There are just a few rare cases when one regrets not having done something, and that's one of them. Otherwise, I would have forgotten it long ago.

In your studio, there's a little mirror, hung in such a way that one is always seeing bits of recently finished paintings reflected in it.

GR: The pleasant thing is that it makes the pictorial space even more variable and more subject to chance than it is in photography.

Even more open?

GR: Yes, this is the only picture that always looks different. And perhaps there's an allusion somewhere to the fact that every picture is a mirror.

Making fun of the modernist attribute of flatness.

GR: Or rather to the view that every picture has space and significance and is an appearance and an illusion, however radical it may be, right down to the modernist goal of the flat surface, as in the 'Grey Pictures': these surfaces, too, have once more become illusionistic.

The Steel Balls, by reflecting the pictorial space, is simultaneously both the receiver and the transmitter of appearance. Once the attribute of the emperor's worldly power, it seems to have rolled out of the picture.

Just like playing boules. Shoot; create new situations.

Against the dissolution of architecture

More than ten years ago we did an interview about a book of your writings. Today we spoke with Walther König about reissuing the book, expanded to include new writings, but paradoxically no new texts have emerged since the last book.

GR: No, no more texts. Somehow that book drove that out of me. I was actually shocked by that, that I said, 'You don't need that any more'; 'this note-taking of feelings, you can just leave that aside'.

But in the meantime quite a few interviews have appeared, some of them quite long.

GR: Interviews, yes, but there one has a partner.

It struck me that in all existing interviews you have been asked very little about architecture. There have been conversations with

architects and also the moment at which you built the house. How did that get started?

GR: That was and is a kind of hobby, an attraction for craft and construction. Building shelving or cabinetry or tools or drawing building plans always has a functional or social motivation. When social changes happen, I am immediately gripped by a passion for building, and I think that in this way I can anticipate or accelerate the transformation of life, at least in the form of sketch. The house where I live was such an anticipatory work – first build and then change your life.

It brought a change with it, then?

GR: Yes, first came the house and then the family and the house was filled.

Could it be that buildings are productive of reality?

GR: [*Laughs heartily*] Yes, with this house I anticipated my vague wish for new social conditions. And the house was oriented in a very naive, polemical way against the dissolution of architecture. It was very conservative: symmetrical, surveyable, stable.

Against the then dominant deconstructivism.

GR: Yes, and it hasn't become any less crazy today.

So it was a reaction against ...

GR: ... all of this crazy rubbish. Certainly, and I'm aware of the danger of a strict position in architecture, such as, for example, Ungers represented. And there are of course many great architects, for example Foster, or Renzo Piano. But when I saw his Klee Centre in Bern, which looks like a stadium for horse racing, I found it simply awful. That has nothing to do with Klee; one can fill that with anything. There's probably a patron in Bern who wants to throw his hundred million to the wind. It's also terrifying that one leaves everything to the architect. That's fundamentally the fault of the patrons, who no longer know what they want. Anyone's head will swell when one gives him no limits.

But it was another story with your house, since you yourself drew the house and became the architect. You had an architect, but only as a consultant.

GR: I built many models. For the details and for the whole realization I needed an architect, who showed me how what I wanted looked. That's the difference between me and Wittgenstein, who drew everything up to the last screw. I don't have quite such an extreme passion for building.

So you made indications, you drew the basic plan and structure?

GR: Everything, each room and the whole ground plan, the cross and the quadratic wings, that beautiful symmetry. If I'm lucky, something timeless has come into being.

Now there's too much dissolution. But then I remember how I cursed about the Gehry museum in Bilbao – and then when I was there, I was indeed not thrilled, but fascinated nonetheless, and pensive.

There is ever more architecture drawn by artists. And there are historically many examples of artists' studios. Joan Miró, for example, had a studio built for him by José Maria Sert, the protagonist of Spanish modernism, in Mallorca. How would a space have to function, in order to serve as a studio for you?

GR: Better than the one I have now. But somehow I would be afraid to have a perfect studio. That's why I leave it as lacking as it is.

The high doors in your home are remarkable.

GR: Yes, three metres high. I like that a lot, and a person is absolutely not diminished by such a door. To the contrary, they become bigger. It sounds perhaps paradoxical, since with my one metre sixty I'd pass through twice.

Another marker of your house is an opening towards the inside and a closing towards the outside. From the street it's almost invisible ...

GR: Perhaps today I'd be less predisposed to shut myself up in that way, but this area in Hahnwald was very difficult for me and I have had to become slowly accustomed to such a neighbourhood.

Then it did have to do with walling yourself off?

GR: Yes, with encapsulating myself and remaining undisturbed. The house itself is open all around. Only after a year did I realize that one can't live there without an alarm system. With twelve ground-level exterior doors, practically unsecured, one could easily be knocked off in one's sleep. So then I changed that.

I'm interested to know whether there were architects that were important for you, who influenced or inspired you?

GR: No particular architects. I had a general interest in buildings, it didn't matter whose or from when. Naturally there are also names, Palladio and the Bauhaus architects and Ungers – everything that looked good.

Mies?

GR: Yes.

Gropius? Le Corbusier?

GR: Gropius, yes. Corbusier is a bit too colourful and round for me.

Another aspect of your relationship to architecture has to do with exhibition. You've often drawn spaces for your paintings.

GR: Sometimes for utopian but also for real spaces, to stage the exhibition properly and to show the paintings in the best way possible.

When did that start? One finds such utopian spatial constellations already in Atlas in the early 60s.

GR: That's when it started. It just reflects an attraction for beautiful spaces. In some cases I insisted, to this end, that a space must have a window. Like in 1986 in the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, where they opened up the window for the first time.

You were also the first one to address the highly problematic spatial orientation of the German Guggenheim in Berlin, and indeed did so by exposing a window that looked out over the street.

GR: That was a part of the work, in a way. Uncovering the windows was very involved and it was also very expensive due to the construction required to orient the glass plates. In Düsseldorf now, as part of the exhibition of the Nordrhein-Westfalen collection, I've once again brought the windows in play, so that one can see from outside in but above all from inside out.

The window as 'display feature'?

GR: I have no idea what that means, but I find it a loss that museums frequently do not wish to have windows any more. The buildings are all climate-controlled and lit in a sterile manner, such that one doesn't need windows.

Like this underground situation in the Lenbachhaus, Munich, where your Düsseldorf exhibition is on display now.

GR: I was very unlucky with that and found it very unpleasant. That's, in truth, not architecture at all, it's a train platform, an un-architecture. Just as a true work of theatre needs a stage, so too paintings need architecture. It's very simple.

There are sketches for the hanging of paintings, glasses, or portraits. And then there are the interesting indications for a museum for the thousand grey paintings, a kind of barracks with a thousand rooms, one per painting. This bi-directional relationship between the painting and the space is important to you. How did things develop with the space in which you collaborated with Blinky Palermo?

GR: I liked his wall works, and once, upon arriving at the Munich gallery, where he had just painted the wall ochre, I said, totally jokingly:

‘Something’s missing here. Next time we should install two sculptures.’ Later we realized that idea in Heiner Friedrich’s gallery in Cologne.

What’s also interesting is the glasses, that begin in the 60s along with the rooms. They are a frequently recurring element. And in recent years the split glasses have been added to them. Can you say something about that?

GR: You mean the eleven wall-leaning glasses? So, after I had planned and drawn out framed plates, the leaning plates were something of a gift. That is, I stumbled across them, here in the studio, the glasses leaning on the wall. They stood there until I discovered them.

A kind of readymade?

GR: A kind of readymade. Because I put them aside for other purposes. It was also not eleven, but five or six, and they looked increasingly better and better. It happened bit by bit. First one put them in the right light, from the floor in the studio. Next came the appropriate support, the correct number was then sought out, and then eventually the piece was finished. At the time I awaited Kasper König, and I wasn’t sure whether he’d even see these eleven plates. But he saw them right away and said that he wanted to have them. That of course pleased me very much.

A few of your works react to spaces, and indeed in the sense of a response to or a critique of a space.

GR: Like for example *Acht Grau* [*Eight Grey*, 2002], which was first installed in the Berlin Guggenheim, or the *6 Graue Spiegel* [*6 Grey Mirrors*, 2003] for Dia:Beacon. Although both works were conceived for a particular space, they would also be possible in another space.

The three BMW paintings were however commissioned exclusively for the entrance hall; just like the twenty-metre stripe [Stroke (on Red), 1980] for the school in Soest. Would these nevertheless be thinkable elsewhere? Also the black installation for the parliamentary building?

GR: Ah yes. The flag is of much too extreme proportions to fit anywhere else. The Reichstag is the appropriate place for *Schwarz, Rot, Gold* [*Black, Red, Gold*, 1999].

*There are a few smaller versions of this flag, and editions.
Interestingly, this commissioned work led to other works.*

GR: I didn't have a commission to do the German flag. The theme inspired me, even though Palermo did one and there's the well-known Jasper Johns flag. I also once hung a one-by-one-metre-large version of the flag in my living room. It didn't work though; it was too penetrating to always have to see the black, red and gold.

There's an interplay: on the one hand one has the flag, and on the other one can also see it abstractly – it goes back and forth.

GR: Yes, in Berlin the flag theme doesn't bother anyone of course. And the whole presentation is so large there – it has so much elegance that it puts one in a good mood. [*Laughs*]

How did the BMW paintings, which were commissioned, come about?

GR: In those days I was making photographs of pallet structures and colour remainders, which I then blew up and painted. The commission came at the right moment, in the sense that what I was already making was applicable. With STRONTIUM it was better still: I was already working on paintings with that theme when I received the request from Herzog & de Meuron and so I had acquired exactly what the STRONTIUM motif needed: a perfect printing technique for these extreme dimensions of more than nine by nine metres.

And that worked only there on that wall?

GR: No, also on other walls. It worked very well, for example, in K20 in Düsseldorf, perhaps even better than in the Young Museum – I've seen only

one photograph of that and it shows it very disappointingly, dead and empty like a photograph of a model.

The effect in Düsseldorf was not in the least lifeless. Both stripes were also commissions?

GR: Yes, I got the long walls and thought that perhaps ten or twelve unique paintings would suit them well. So I started to make ‘art’ towards that end, but only ridiculous creations emerged – until I struck on the idea of the two stripes.

But working on the stripes released something extreme that wouldn't have emerged without this commission, and that's the other aspect that's so interesting.

GR: Yes, that's true, the task brought that with it. Something bothered me at the time, namely the proximity to Lichtenstein's stroke. But my longer stripe was so extreme and different from Lichtenstein's that my concerns were dispelled.

With Lichtenstein it is clearly the representation of a stroke, but with you it is much more ambivalent.

GR: My two stripes also play with the illusion of actual strokes, that look as though they could only be produced by a giant brush.

We haven't yet spoken, in relation to architecture, about the church windows. When I was here a year ago, I went to the little chapel on the outskirts of Cologne. That wasn't a commissioned work. Instead you hung an existing photo-painting there. How did this happen?

GR: A nice printer had gifted me a sixty-year-old photograph, with which I became fascinated. An aerial view of the southern part of Cologne, taken by the US air force, with the destroyed bridge and countless bomb craters.

It's reminiscent of your city paintings –

GR: –because they also look so bombed-out. With this photo, however, it was rather the inverse: because it was itself damaged, I was able to rework and retouch it, such that it came to look like a brand-new photograph. We then made an edition, and a large photograph for the church here.

Now you are once again working on a project for a church, a window installation for the Cologne Dome.

GR: Yes, and that is already an enormous thing. The starting point for that work is an image, a colour table from 1974. The principle remains the same: a number of different hues were placed at random in a predetermined grid, and the window was filled with that.

It was made purely of small squares, like the colour table from 1974.

GR: Yes, only in another field, which was not a square, but rather this Gothic window. The size of the squares is also different, and the colour scale is reduced.

Why are the colours fewer?

GR: It is restricted to seventy-two hues. Naturally one can produce a greater variety of coloured glasses, but on the one hand the hues must be discernible from one another, and on the other the scale should be balanced, in other words if one has five hundred shades of red produced, but only a hundred different shades of green, the overall effect would be red. So we had to develop a balanced scale of colours.

I also discern a connection to the thousand grey paintings and the thousand rooms – both represent an ‘ars combinatoria’.

GR: Really? Well, the dome window is about something very concrete, actual, and about a very particular place, which is pregnant with history and great significance, as few others are. All of that is so powerful that each addition of modern art frequently appears muffled, false, ridiculous or kitschy. In order to circumvent this danger, I approached the space in a very

pragmatic manner: how does the dome look and how is it used? In this way I avoided wanting anything in particular, neither a depiction of the saints, nor a divine communication, nor in a way even art. It was only to be a beaming, beautiful window, as excellent and beautiful and full of meaning as is possible for me here today.

Illustrating nothing? Representing nothing?

GR: Nothing like that. Just to realize this very simple plan in the best way possible. Naturally I couldn't have arrived at such a thought without first making up a blueprint. To the contrary, in the beginning there was experimentation with every possible idea for an image, accompanied by dissatisfaction with many unusable ideas, until I came across a reproduction of my old colour-field image and was indeed somewhat shocked, because it was so suitable.

It is nevertheless remarkable: you made something for the smaller churches, and now for the window in the Cologne Dome, and the window for the cathedral in Reims also stands out. You've always described yourself as an atheist in earlier interviews – has that changed in some way?

GR: No, in the sense of the Church I'm indeed an atheist. As a fifteen-year-old I was drawn to this out of defiance, at twenty I left the Evangelical Church, and later I realized that I wasn't capable of believing in the Christian idea of God and everything that went along with it. And nevertheless everything that the Church, in particular the Catholic Church, represents and does, what it demands and offers, is to me more trusted and valuable than anything else. That had naturally to do with Christian culture at first, with all of the wondrous works that I have carried with me throughout my life, and then with a lifelong growing insight into the persuasiveness of Christian doctrine, that is so much wiser than the ideologies that promise us paradise on earth. I see a further attachment to the Church in the capacity for belief; that is, for me, our ability to believe is as necessary a possession as the ability to eat or drink. For better or for

worse, we always believe. Because of this the concept 'atheist' strikes me as an oversimplification.

The Victoria painting is an enormous abstract work in the entrance hall of an insurance company.

GR: In contrast with other large works, which were planned, and thus executed according to a design, these were both totally freely painted, without a schema, and without a photograph. That was really something quite incautious, to just up and paint like that.

These large works often oscillate between micro and macro elements. That's particularly the case with the stripe, but one can also see this in the relation to the details in the War Cut [2003] book. I wanted to ask you about this shuttling back and forth between the micro and the macro. In your exhibition in Munich, the final space with the silicate formed an almost autonomous zone. It was almost a space within a space. It was my favourite space in the exhibition.

GR: Beautiful! That makes a lot of sense. I was fascinated by the motif because imaging techniques had developed to the point that one could actually see the atom, but one could never see it sharply. That I find striking, since there's a limit given there.

One can't go further.

GR: One can't go further, there's actually an end there, and because there's no more that allows itself to be seen. There a new quality starts, that is indeed fascinating! And in fact an event shows itself to us flatly and simply as blurriness, as a small blurry photograph.

The first example came in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung; is the FAZ something of a permanent source for you?

GR: [Laughs] Well, yes, it's that way with newspapers. One becomes accustomed to the daily transmission of novelties from the world. And even

when I am disturbed by them daily, I like them.

The FAZ was also the trigger for War Cut. The book began as a small project. I had invited you to Paris and there you photographed many details of one of your works. What came after had a lot to do with chance, did it not?

GR: Well, yes – at first I didn't know at all what I should do with all the photographs. They lay in my studio until the Iraq War broke out and I read all the reports in the newspaper.

Then a great construction emerged out of the chance encounter.

GR: Yes. Perhaps because the event, that the news article described to me, was as incomprehensible as my abstract detail photographs. In any case, I saw a relationship.

You then shifted them around for months.

GR: For a few weeks at least, until the layout emerged, an order against the chaos. It was good.

Perhaps in closing we can talk again about your studio. In fact there's an entire exhibition's worth of new paintings and drawings here to see.

GR: The drawings have just been started, but the twelve paintings are finished. It's nevertheless hard to say anything about them. For me they are still too fresh and still remain to be understood. Are you familiar with stall-fire? No? When horses stand a bit too long in the stall they run better. That's how it was with me and this series.

Then it went very quickly?

GR: It took a couple of months. And now I don't know what I should do with them. They seem finished, and are perhaps not so bad.

The smaller painting here depicts the Twin Towers?

GR: Yes. September 11th probably preoccupied me more than I anticipated. The large drawings are also to do with that theme; perhaps all of the paintings have to do with it, even when there's nothing recognizable in them.

You were on the way to your last New York exhibition on September 11th, and the aeroplane was forced to land in Halifax. Here in your studio now is the next New York exhibition. These twelve paintings are among the darkest of your abstract works.

GR: With the exception of the elegant *December, November and January*, which are blacker. The new paintings here are more spontaneous, sketchier, less aesthetic, more poignant. The small painting of both towers was at first very colourful, with the garishly colourful explosion under the wondrously blue sky and with the flying debris. That couldn't be. Only once I had practically obliterated it, scraped it away, was it acceptable.

As a drawing it already hung a year ago here – was it then actually both the first and the last painting?

GR: Yes, that's right. But I have reservations about showing it. On the one hand it is a totally harmless image, small and not sensational in the least, and on the other it has such a spectacular title, *The 11th of September*. I should hold on to it and, when it's acceptable, later, exhibit it.

I wanted finally to ask you, if there are earlier unrealized projects that you'd like to see completed?

GR: To build a new house. To realize something of the utopia that, in earlier times, about forty years ago, we thought up. Totally practical things: a transportation system in the Ruhr district, beautiful social housing in Rheinwiesen, in Oberkassel.

You have plans for social building projects?

GR: They were really cute wooden models, dilettantish, but reflecting the deep conviction that the world can and should be made better.

You have already built your house.

GR: But now I think it could be better.

What would you do differently today?

GR: Oh, I'd change areas, elevate the land a bit more, make the house a bit more practical and the four wings of the house a metre longer. And then, naturally, a much better studio.

Unplanned paintings

Can we talk a bit about the new paintings ... it is indeed the first time that this unbelievable new cycle will be shown.

GR: It's a series of six large, square paintings; and they are special to me insofar as I still don't fully understand them. They were planned entirely differently; that is, I wanted to paint them based on photographs that I prepared two years ago, photographs of various atomic structures, comparable to the silicate painting or the STRONTIUM painting of 2004. These photographs promised beautiful, serious, and somewhat unsettling paintings. And as I started with the first of them, towards the end of August, I lost the desire for it and began to destroy the painting, to over-paint it, without being conscious of the direction in which I wished to move, and in this way I simply painted on. This peculiar condition of prospectlessness, of directionlessness and exuberance, held sway over me until all six paintings were finished. Of course, fantasies arise of how the paintings might look while you are working on them. For example, I thought for a time that the paintings must be totally white, with only a few markings, huge signs in oil on canvas.

So a little bit like the white paintings that were exhibited in Japan ... ?

GR: Yes, something like that. Such ideas steadily encroached, but they usually dissipated by the next day, or in a week or so. And then it went further, without 'sense or understanding'. So in this regard these may well

be the freest paintings. I had also not thought it possible that the paintings would be finished – indeed I couldn't imagine an end result. But in fact they were finished after three months; that is, I couldn't do anything more to them. I was almost disappointed by that.

Because all of a sudden a void appeared?

GR: Yes, that too. That is indeed often the case, when something is done and one feels released and unused. Somehow one knows. It's actually not so difficult. It's when one of them doesn't bring anything to mind any longer, not even the idea of throwing it away. That's also a part of it, that's also very much in order, a very healthy act, when one throws something away. But in this case the 'it's finished' came very unexpectedly. I had felt constantly as if I would have to, or would be able to, paint there for ever. But as always, the paintings were finished and the next problem was that I didn't know what the paintings that appeared before me showed and thus how I could name them. And with this your question helped a lot. You asked me what music I'd been listening to while working, and I answered: Cage!

And thus the title emerged ...

GR: ... Looking back I have to say: that's exactly right. At that time I had just discovered Cage's *Complete Piano Music*, or discovered it anew, and since then had listened to it almost exclusively. Around twelve CDs, all with Steffen Schleiermacher. Wonderful. Of course such a title is only obliquely related to the paintings; indeed it really doesn't say anything, it only guides one's way of looking in a particular direction, towards particular relationships and similarities, and in this it makes much more sense than a mere name. In any case, the title is also meant as an *hommage* and an expression of wonder for the music.

You've been impressed by Cage for a long while. You've also said that the Lecture on Nothing impressed you: I've got nothing to say, and that's what I'm saying ...

GR: Yes, exactly. Funnily a totally different reference occurs to me now, one to do with a visual similarity: yesterday I once again saw this beautiful postcard from Francesco Guardi – the *Laguna Grigia*; a wonderful little image, that I saw once in Milan. Such connections bring me joy.

That brings us back to Venice ...

GR: In the ‘Grey Laguna’ by John Cage.

Perhaps we can talk a bit more about Cage and contingency. You’ve frequently spoken about the concept of contingency in Cage and your work, and it seems that contingency once again plays a role in these unplanned paintings ...

GR: Yes, an essential role, and also in the abstract paintings, since despite all technical experience I can’t precisely foresee what will emerge when I add a giant scraper full of colour or scrape colour away. Surprises always emerge, whether disappointing or inspiring, transformations of the painting that I must then try to understand before I can go further. It’s indeed exemplary to see, or rather to hear, how intricately and intelligently and sensitively Cage works with the contingent, so that music emerges from it.

You also speak of discipline in Cage. What interests you is that contingency is only achievable with a heavy dose of discipline. That holds also for these paintings.

GR: Yes, otherwise they would be mere smears. Contingency is only usable because it is worked through; that is to say, eliminated or allowed or brought to the fore, and thus given form, as also with the colour table and now with the dome window.

When I saw the Cage paintings for the first time in your studio, you weren’t yet totally sure whether the cycle should contain five or six paintings. It was as though there was coherence among these five paintings, and then a sixth painting that was somehow part of the series but also somehow not ... Can you say something more about that? In Venice I believe all were shown.

GR: Yes, the question of five or six answered itself with time, because this first painting self-evidently belonged to the series, even when it looked outwardly somewhat different and somewhat weaker than the following five. It was something of an introduction.

These new paintings are ...

GR: More spontaneous, freer, less planned ...

I'm trying to ask – because with these paintings something totally new happens, that didn't exist before – if we could perhaps circle around that once again ... ?

GR: It is difficult for me to formulate. I am at first happy that I can slowly recognize what the paintings show, that anything is presented there at all. In other words, that they show something that is real in some way. But it takes some time before I can describe what that is.

Perhaps one more question about construction and deconstruction, since it's very interesting that this painting, like many of your abstracts, started with an image that was then destroyed, and that there are these various phases of the painting that you've documented photographically in a book, where one sees the whole painted-over image, that doesn't exist any longer. It's really a very destructive act, but there's also simultaneously a wish to make a well-constructed and constructive image.

GR: Yes, it is suspenseful to work in this way, with the destruction and construction and further destruction, and so on – that's what's required, otherwise nothing can come into being. Only with the figural paintings is it somewhat different. There the combined destruction and construction isn't so evident.

Do you think these are optimistic images?

GR: ... cautiously, yes ...

And what comes next? The paintings are now finished, and it's always interesting to peek into the future ...

GR: I have no idea! At my age it's a happy thing when something new comes at all. I hope for that and am ready for it.

A final question: there is this beautiful little book by Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, and I wanted to ask you, what would be your advice to a young painter today?

GR: [*Laughs*] Don't be seducible, and don't give up believing in art – that's the only thing.

GILBERT & GEORGE

I first visited Gilbert & George at their house in east London as a teenager in 1987. It was one of my early encounters with artists, and influential in my life. They invited me in and answered the questions I had prepared, about their work and the key moments for them. They described their trajectory as 'a pilgrimage', and we discussed the invention of living sculpture.

Their house is very like the Sir John Soane's Museum: it's a studio and a house and a place of dense collections, from vases to porno mags. After our talks we always go to dinner at one of their favourite restaurants in the area, where we continue the recording. The dinner venue can vary, but the rhythm of our meetings does not. The world needs rituals, said Tarkovsky, and Gilbert & George have them.

What is a good museum?

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *Since I saw you last, the new big change in your house is the arrival of Hal – this supercomputer like the one in Kubrick's 2001.*

GEORGE: It hasn't even arrived yet. It's all in one small room at the moment, but once we know how it works, we shall have a proper room for it. We'll probably use Studio 3.

GILBERT: We're training every day now – it's quite exciting. Everybody seems to know how to work a computer, but they don't have a vision of what to do with it. We know exactly how we will use it. We'll use it as a tool to create our pictures, so we'll know exactly what we're doing.

Would it be correct to say that the computer won't impose its programs on you, but that you'll be imposing your programs on the computer?

GEORGE: Yes, we're using it to continue our art. There will be changes, as there have always been changes in our art. When we first started to make pictures around 1969, we had a totally different studio and equipment. But then we changed that, and two years on we changed it again, and then we introduced colour and changed the equipment yet again. So this is another stage.

GILBERT: We feel it's another technology for expressing oneself in a faster way. Normally when we do a piece, they're so laborious and handmade, so now maybe we'll be able to cut down some of the hours and make more pictures. That would be amazing.

You'll become a picture machine.

GEORGE: Yes, we're always disappointed that we're unable to do all the pictures we've had inside ourselves. We've always had to stop.

GILBERT: We've always had the idea of projecting our ideas directly from our brains on to the wall. And now we're nearly able to do that! This will be the perfect machine for us.

Is it an extremely high-resolution digital printing machine?

GEORGE: It's a digital scanning system – the most advanced scanner there is, for our purposes. Then we'll have inkjet printers to print the pictures out.

GILBERT: The young people around us are amazed that we're able to go into this technology, which is extremely naive of them, actually. We ask them, if we were to put them in our studio as it is now, would they be able to make works like ours using the old system? Not for one second! They would be completely baffled by it all – they wouldn't know which liquids to put in which tray. They'd be totally foxed.

You mentioned this extremely complex procedure to me once before: it's a very layered process.

GEORGE: Very elaborate.

GILBERT: Thirty years ago we used the enlarger to project images on to the wall and make pictures from that, which was very progressive in those days. We're always trying to use technology to give us more time just to concentrate on the art.

Will the grid of the framing system remain, or will the digital technology trigger a change?

GEORGE: We always think of our pictures as digital anyway because of the form. If you see a picture of ours a hundred yards away in a museum, you'll recognize it as one of ours. That's very important.

So it's a system that really works?

GEORGE: From the very first photo pieces we did, they've always been digital – all those little panels coming together to make forms.

GILBERT: The machines can only print out at a certain size, so we keep to that. We love the structure of the grid because we can make compositions. Also, the framing and glazing would become impossible on a larger scale.

GEORGE: It limits you. We're not sitting like the traditional artist in front of a blank canvas wondering what to do. We don't have that total freedom. It's so important for transport and for maintaining the picture. Can you imagine the things people would write on our pictures if they weren't glazed?

It's an anti-graffiti system!

GEORGE: That's true! Although we are pro-graffiti, remember. That's what we said when we went into the church yesterday and saw all these poor people being completely oppressed by this fascism of faith, and I wanted to say, 'They need some boys with their spray cans in here, that's what they need!' Everyone has been so terrified of this for centuries.

GILBERT: It's like a totalitarian system – if you don't believe, you go to hell for ever.

GEORGE: We find the superiority of the people in charge very oppressive. It's the same in southern Europe when we stay in small Spanish or French towns over Christmas – you see people coming from the churches, and then you see the superior vicar walking through the streets with his papers under his arm and his head in the air. He doesn't even speak to the people – they are superior, horrid types.

I've seen your amazing 'Dirty Words Pictures' [1977] show at the Serpentine Gallery in 2002 and graffiti has a really strong presence there.

GEORGE: It was extraordinary to get them together again after so long.

Was it a previously unrealized project?

GILBERT: Yes, we'd tried to realize it in many different ways. It was quite difficult. The reaction in England was still in some ways quite negative. It was unbelievable. After twenty-five years! What can you say about that? They're part of history – they're classic pieces.

Do you still encounter resistance?

GEORGE: One review ended with a horrible sentence in which the reviewer said they were so pleased that the world and art had moved on since 1977. But that's just not true. The issues that are alive in 'The Dirty Words Pictures' are as current today as ever.

GILBERT: They don't look like they were made twenty-five years ago; they look like they could have been made today

GEORGE: Problems with drugs are even greater today – issues with the police, and so on.

Are there other, similar shows that are still unrealized?

GEORGE: I think our retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum is about to become an unrealized project! [*Laughs*]

GILBERT: [*Laughs*]

GEORGE: It was all going well, and Arnold Lehman and his curator seemed very proud to invite us to do it. We constructed a huge model of the museum and installed the whole show in it. But from that moment on, it started to fall to pieces and crumble. They saw our definitive model as a starting point, and they didn't understand that that was it. Then they came to London and spent two days going through every single picture we'd ever created, making a pile of 'yes' pictures and a pile of 'no' pictures. And we had to select our exhibition from the 'yes' pile. That's more oppressive than anywhere else in the world!

Has that never happened before?

GEORGE: Not in that way.

GILBERT: Then Arnold went home and tried to arrange other venues for the exhibition, but he got very negative responses. We believe it's because of Christian fundamentalism: curators in America are terrified of touching anything that is even slightly controversial, to do with nakedness or sex. They're absolutely horrified.

GEORGE: It's very strange. They're terrified of controversy – they're very conservative.

They're worried about losing their jobs.

GILBERT: Arnold Lehman is one of the most liberal museum directors around. But he couldn't find people to take the show.

GEORGE: He told us that someone was so rude to him that, for the first time in his life, he put the phone down on them – he couldn't bear their manner.

GILBERT: They would ask questions like, 'Do they have women in their art now?' Imagine, that was important to them!

So once you've designed the exhibition layout, that's it. Basically, you conceive your exhibitions as whole pieces. Would it be fair to describe it that way?

GEORGE: Absolutely.

Do you always do this yourselves, without delegating responsibilities?

GEORGE: It's different from the museum professionals, because they always want to create an exhibition with a view to taste, considering their own preferences for the most part. We install our works as though we were the viewers – people arriving at the museum who have never seen an exhibition before. They come and see the first picture on the wall. They turn to the left and then to the right. For our audiences, we try to create the same adventure we ourselves had when we were creating it – to make the exhibition a human experience.

GILBERT: The museum professionals always try to put in their favourite pieces, but we never have favourite pieces. We always arrange the rooms with different kinds of emotions. We arrange different configurations, trying out, say, images from the 80s in one room, all black or whatever. We do this so that for every room you walk into, your emotions are affected in a different way. If you can't affect the ordinary public, they'll leave the museum empty-handed. They won't remember anything about it. That's why we want to concentrate on the viewer.

In your Guggenheim show, you often layered your pictures, creating quite experimental displays [‘Gilbert & George’, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1985]. Could you tell me more about this?

GEORGE: We always like to take on the space, because museum directors sometimes invite you and say rather apologetically that it's not such a good space – that they don't even like their own museum very much. But our approach is to come to terms with the space the way it is. It's like people who don't like the appearance of other people – they don't fancy this person or that. But the key is to see what's interesting about that person – to see what's in that person that somebody will one day fall in love with, whether it's the eyes, the hair, or skin. It's the same with museums: find the nature of that museum, and go with that. Somebody built it that way, and once you take on the space, you can use it in a friendly way.

GILBERT: It's very simple for us. We can use any space, especially difficult spaces. They're much more challenging. Basically, anything goes. It's the propaganda of inner feelings.

GEORGE: And it's about seizing the moment. There's still an ongoing debate in London about the Hayward Gallery. Half of the educated public would like to tear it down, others want to paint it white, put a glass roof over it, or cover it with plants, but we say we love the Hayward – it's fantastic, and we'd use it as is. If you want something different, build another museum somewhere else. London has such a great collection of buildings – it

doesn't have a general scheme. Just walk around for five minutes in London, and you'll see buildings from every single period of architecture. We like that – it's chaos.

GILBERT: We've always believed that an installation has to attack the viewer.

GEORGE: To put it in a nutshell, the directors and curators of the world can be divided into roughly two groups: those who wonder which artist to give an exhibition to, and those who wonder which artist's work they want to bring to the people in that city or country and its visitors. We only realized that when we had the Guggenheim exhibition: many journalists asked us, 'So how does it feel to be given an exhibition at the Guggenheim?' And we thought, 'Oh my goodness, there's something wrong with this!' It wasn't them who gave us an exhibition, but rather us who gave an exhibition to the visitors. It was the other way around, and that's a very important difference.

GILBERT: We've often been accused of self-promotion, but recently these types of accusations seem to have stopped. It's absurd, really. Everybody has to promote their work, but when it comes to art, they think you shouldn't do it. If people like it and come to see the show, it's as if you're lucky or something. But we don't believe in that. Promoting your work is part of an exhibition. You have to get the people there so they can have a look at it. We were already designing invitations in 1969 because we realized that every single card we sent out had to be beautiful so that people would remember it and not throw it away. 'All my life I give you nothing and still you ask for more' [1969] was probably one of the first ones.

GEORGE: I still don't understand the sentence, but it's a very good one: 'All my life I give you nothing and still you ask for more.' Very good. It sums up everything, but I still don't know what it means.

So you're in control of your shows.

GILBERT: We want to be so involved that we try to design every invitation card, the catalogues and every last detail. The computer is going to be an extraordinary new adventure for us. We're going to be able to design our

own invitation cards much faster. Before, we had to give them to someone else to type up on a computer. Now we can even design the catalogues ourselves on Quark.

GEORGE: It'll probably be the biggest propaganda machine ever, if we're able to do it all.

GILBERT: Our propaganda is so simple and brutal. Other designers don't do that.

GEORGE: They're rather frightened of it – they always want to water it down!

GILBERT: For us it's very simple: we're picture-makers, and we make pictures to express how it feels to be alive and try to change the world.

Books have always been an important medium for you; they've never taken second place in your work.

GEORGE: We are so keen to have control. Just like with the layout of an exhibition, the museums always have an aesthetic agenda for the catalogue. Their agenda is to do something prestigious for the museum, something that's a compliment to their designer. They don't think very much about the vast general public who may or may not buy one or two copies or send a copy to a friend.

You've moved away from the small-run artist books and focused on catalogues you design yourselves.

GEORGE: If we showed most exhibition catalogues that we received in the past to our younger friends in Brick Lane, they wouldn't have a single word to describe them. They wouldn't know whether they were books or magazines. But if you hand them the Basel catalogue and ask them what it is, they'll tell you it's a catalogue. It's a more democratic object. If you make a catalogue so weird that only some people in four Western cities understand the art object, it's no good.

Is it part of the 'art for all' idea?

GEORGE: Absolutely, democratic art.

GILBERT: We don't analyse ourselves very much. We're not the type of artists who are totally conscious of what we're doing. We're just driven to the next thing. We always feel that they're beating us down and we have to fight like dogs.

So it's not about mirroring your own production, but rather the next step?

GEORGE: Absolutely. It's an enormously complicated thing to be an artist, to have a studio and exist in the world – so complicated.

GILBERT: And doing artworks that aren't easy. We're making art to disturb the middle classes – that's what we're trying to do.

GEORGE: When some people in the profession try to be rather blasé about 'The Dirty Words Pictures', then our reply is very simple: 'Did you make them in 1977?' Nobody else made them.

GILBERT: You can go through all the catalogues of all the artists this century, and nobody did those kinds of pieces.

GEORGE: I'm amazed we did them, looking back. I don't understand how we got round to doing those very aggressive and moving pictures. The Serpentine exhibition opened just a few weeks ago, but those works have already had such a big influence on the popular media. There's already a brand of Pot Noodle that uses the word 'dirty' as part of its campaign. Can you imagine 'dirty' becoming part of a food advertisement? It's absurd!

Your work has always resisted the homogenizing force of globalization. Could you perhaps talk a little about this idea?

GEORGE: Well, to begin, it's very important for contemporary art to reach people during the artist's lifetime. It's like medicine or anything else: if something is invented, it should be available everywhere. Some countries had to wait sixty years before they got penicillin. I don't think they should

have to wait sixty years before they see an abstract painting or whatever the latest form is.

Music travels quickly, but art doesn't. Are you suggesting that many places only get to see a show many years after the work has been made?

GEORGE: And often fifty years after the death of the artist.

Very early on, you had shows in Russia and China – perhaps you could tell me about those? [‘Pictures 1983–88’, Central House of the Artists, New Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 1990; ‘Gilbert & George China Exhibition’, National Art Gallery, Beijing; Art Museum, Shanghai, 1993]

GILBERT: We like the idea of confronting different cultures with our work. If you can make it a powerful exhibition, it doesn't matter where it is. They're able to read it and see it without words. They have to be able to feel what we think about being alive. That's how we did it in Russia and in China.

GEORGE: Pioneering territory.

GILBERT: Confronting ordinary people with what we do.

GEORGE: The availability of living artists' work is so important in places like Russia. We realized that when we arrived there and were taken to some studios where many artists worked. They asked us to sign a copy of our Eindhoven catalogue, and we said, 'Of course!' So they went and brought it to us, and it looked three hundred years old. All of the edges were rounded like an antique book, and the sides were yellow. We realized that thousands and thousands of people had been through that one copy. It shows an extraordinary need for people to be involved in whatever's happening in the world today.

It was interesting in China because we had to visit the two groups for a formal reception. First, we went to the official artists, who all had oil paintings on canvas of Venice or places in China that looked like Venice, and they were similar to early Impressionist pictures. They were very

official artists approved by the government. They arranged a little reception for us and drank a toast to us: ‘To Gilbert and George, very good artists.’ Then we went to the dissident artists’ settlement, which was outside the town. They were making art like what you can see in any magazine from 1965 on. It was indistinguishable from art outside of China, in a way. They also arranged a nice little reception for us and drank a toast: ‘To Gilbert and George, bad men’, because bad men were good for the dissident artists! So good for one lot, bad for the others, but it actually meant ‘good’ for both.

You’ve had a very global impact from the very beginning.

GEORGE: We believe that cities and countries are just a tiny bit different because of exhibitions. After ‘The Naked Shit Pictures’ [1994] were shown in London, it was a different city – ever so slightly different. They started to change the advertising and change text in newspapers. Tiny, tiny details started to enter the fabric of life. They changed the advertisement for ketchup, for example, saying, ‘You can give it a good smack on the bottom.’ They’d never advertised ketchup like that before. And we had made pictures of bum holes. Lots of details like that.

GILBERT: If they see one of our works, they will remember it for ever. We don’t have a lot of pieces in museums in Europe, but they all know our work. We’ve had enough shows for them to remember what we’ve done. And through the books.

GEORGE: It’s very strange that there are artists who have had pieces in permanent collections for years and years, but are still hardly known at all. And then there are many artists who don’t have their pictures on permanent display, but are very well known and well loved. We’re often asked, ‘Which year did you do the Venice Biennale?’ People don’t believe for one minute that we didn’t. But there are many people who did go to the Venice Biennale who they wouldn’t know about – who’ve been totally forgotten. So to be in that kind of established situation is not the only answer to life.

GILBERT: The best thing is the Royal Coat of Arms, even in the ‘Dirty Words’.

GEORGE: We signed underneath the Royal Coat of Arms in every picture until 1977.

GILBERT: It's totally forbidden.

Really?

GILBERT: Oh yes, you have to have permission.

GEORGE: Technically, yes.

And you did it without permission?

GILBERT: Yes, because we wanted to be established artists.

GEORGE: We still want to be established artists!

GILBERT: We never get it! We never get it! [*Laughs*]

GEORGE: [*Laughs*]

Ever since the 60s you've developed different 'circuits'. The usual situation is that contemporary art travels through the same circuits of gallery and museum shows. You, however, have had your own circuits from the very beginning.

GEORGE: We feel the need for that. We were saying earlier that not to be shown is not necessarily a disadvantage, and to be shown all the time is not necessarily an advantage. When the Tate Modern opened, lots of so-called 'ordinary' people talked to us about it, like taxi drivers, saying that they had been to the Tate Modern – people who had possibly never been to the Tate before. We would always ask them the same question: 'What was your favourite work of art?' And they all answered in the same way: 'Er, well, I don't think I had a real favourite.' So they go to this extravagant new museum built at vast expense and cannot name one work of art that spoke to them. It's a disastrous reality in a way.

GILBERT: The Disney syndrome.

GEORGE: Everyone remembers the slope down to the so-called Turbine Hall.

GILBERT: Yes, the museum is more important than all the art – the art is not so memorable. I think the view from the café on the top floor is more memorable than the whole lot. I think the way it's displayed and concentrated shows how the Tate never wants to make an artist move. They want to democratize them, to make them all equal, so that one is not shining any more than the next. Everyone has to be the same because of equality or whatever it is. Art has never been based on that. Art has always been based on artists doing their own personal thing and making it shine.

But then you disturbed this system of museum shopping in an interesting way, by putting an object into the shop and creating a scandal.

GEORGE: Ah yes, with our tape. It's very good.

Even the police became involved, didn't they?

GEORGE: We were shocked! We came home from a journey and were checking our faxes. We were amazed to discover a fax from the North Yorkshire Police saying that they would like us to contact them immediately, which we did. We were alarmed to find out that somebody had been either bound up or strangled using our tape purchased from the Tate gift shop. It was designed using details from our picture *Death Hope Life Fear* [1984]. We were amazed that they came to interview us, because if the same lady had been strangled with a Sainsbury's bag, they wouldn't have gone and asked Mr Sainsbury for an interview. It's discrimination against the artist.

GILBERT: Not only that, they did a leading article in the *Evening Standard* trying to implicate us in what had happened; they suggested we were in some way responsible because we had created such extreme art.

GEORGE: The suggestion in the *Evening Standard* was, 'Well, what do you expect with art like theirs?'

Was the tape removed from the shop?

GILBERT: Yes, it was. I don't know if it was put back on sale.

GEORGE: But a killing from time to time spices things up!

Yesterday we spoke about the idea of the book as a medium. The first larger book happens to be one of the rarest books in the art world: Side by Side. Could you tell me a little bit more about this?

GEORGE: *Side by Side* and *Dark Shadow* were both based on a single spread, so they weren't like books you can read from page one to five hundred. You can open the book at any point, and one spread of the book is self-supporting: the text relates to that particular plate and doesn't continue in any way.

GILBERT: First we did the plates, and then we did the writing on top of the plates. We would go to Wimpy near Liverpool Street Station because we had no heating in our place, and we would put one photograph or drawing against the glass, and then we'd write about it. That's how we did it.

Side by Side was made in Wimpy? That's amazing.

GEORGE: Yes, absolutely. It was the cheapest food.

It's closely related to a storyboard. You said it was all handmade, a do-it-yourself book, so there must have been mountains of linen covers in your house.

GILBERT: They were all marbled by us, by hand. They take ages to dry. The whole house was filled with these sheets.

GEORGE: We realized a long time ago how important books are for people in different ways. Some people keep the books they acquire as young people until their dying days because they want to have those books on their shelves. When people go to visit someone's house, they always glance at the bookshelf because they think they can get a character reading of their host by seeing the books he or she has or doesn't have. We had a beautiful letter from a lady recently saying that she was eighty-four and was moving

from her house into a retirement home, so she was only going to have a small room and was very sad that she would not be able to take her furniture with her. She could only take a few things with her. But she's keeping all of our catalogues, and she said she's going to go through them every day!

GILBERT: The most important book – it was a revolution for us – was the catalogue we did for the Eindhoven show. We designed it from the beginning to the end. They were absolutely shocked. Nobody had ever printed such a big catalogue before. But we confronted them, and they couldn't say no!

GEORGE: If you look back, all the catalogues from museums at the time were not only very slim. They were often very poorly printed, and sometimes even had stuck-in prints. They weren't even properly published books.

Sometimes with advertising in the back.

GEORGE: Yes, for some local company or whatever. But in the archive of the Eindhoven Museum, Rudi [Fuchs] has two letters: one is from the minister of finance saying, 'What on earth is this proposed budget for a catalogue? This is impossible! This is more than it costs to make seventy books. We can't possibly have you spending this amount of money on one publication.' Two years later, there was another letter from the same government department saying, 'We feel we must congratulate Eindhoven on having a prize-winning catalogue – you should do more publications of this sort.' [Laughs]

Once again, you changed the rules of the game.

GILBERT: Absolutely.

GEORGE: Every artist wanted a catalogue like that afterwards.

Around the same time you also made the early video pieces, such as Gordon's Makes Us Drunk [1972].

GEORGE: It's admired by young people, yes, though I'm not quite sure what their interest in that piece is. Why do you think that is? Why are they so attracted to it?

It's something to do with time, I think – an obsession with time.

GILBERT: And being drunk.

GEORGE: The only thing we can gather from the response is that people are fascinated that it's progressively the same, but a lot of different things come into your mind when you're watching it. It brings out other things.

GILBERT: I still believe that one of our best films was *The World of Gilbert & George* [produced with Philip Haas in 1981]. It was a seventy-minute movie. We saw it two weeks ago, and the interviews in it are fascinating. We used to run out of our house, go around and find somebody, invite them in, and ask them the amazing question of what life is all about.

GEORGE: What makes you most unhappy.

GILBERT: What makes you the most happy?

Would it be accurate to mention melancholy?

GEORGE: We would never say that we're melancholy. We don't like the idea of saying that we're depressed, either. We prefer the simple word 'unhappy' more. Depressed suggests a clinical condition, and we're rather frightened of that.

So melancholy less in the sense of depression and more as a trigger for art – the anatomy of melancholy?

GEORGE: It's a powerful force.

GILBERT: I'm convinced that we've been driven by unhappiness. Not even driven by art. There are hidden forces.

GEORGE: We understand very well the power of being rejected. We think it has incredible power. An enormous number of people have wanted to get

out of our projects, have censored us, and so on, and there is a great force for good in that. It builds character.

GILBERT: One of the things we remember most from our lives is the rejection. Since having our Christmas crib rejected by the Tate Gallery, they have started an annual project where they ask an artist to design a Christmas tree. They've had Christmas trees that are upside down, torn up, covered in oil – every weird and disgusting thing you can imagine. But when we wanted to do a crib, they rejected it. Then two weeks ago they rejected us again. For thirty years they've rejected us.

GEORGE: When we talk about this, people often say, 'But the Tate owns some of your works.' But we remember the first work they purchased from us, which was *Balls: The Evening Before the Morning After* [1972]. It's the first and largest drinking piece we did. They bought it from the Nigel Greenwood Gallery in London, but that was only because Anne Seymour was a curator at the Tate. She told the director at the time, Sir Norman Reid, that there was this marvellous work of modern art that was very inexpensive and that they should buy it. But he didn't want to, so she lobbied the other curators at the Tate, and they all came to the conclusion that they should try to persuade him to seize the opportunity. In the end, they put so much pressure on him that he said, 'OK, I'll buy it, but as long as I'm director of this museum, we will never buy another work by Gilbert & George!'

Incredible.

GEORGE: So he was discriminating against works of art that hadn't even been created yet!

GILBERT: They did it time and time again. What we don't like is that they never tell you why. It's just a 'no' without any explanation. We've been rejected every time.

You mentioned your first exhibitions, but you've also spoken of other early projects abroad. What was your first exhibition

outside the UK?

GILBERT: The one in Düsseldorf [‘Between’, 1969].

GEORGE: That was extraordinary because, again, it came out of rejection – not the show, but the introduction. We always think everything is fine: if people are happy, then it’s fine, but if they’re unhappy, it’s better that you find out. That way there’s no disaster. So when an exhibition called ‘When Attitudes Become Form’ [1969] ...

... curated by Harald Szeemann ...

GEORGE: ... came to London to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, we were very excited because we had heard that wherever it descended in the world, it would be added to by a local curator. We were thrilled because we knew that the local curator would be Charles Harrison, who knew our work well. While we were baby artists, we knew that he might well choose us to add to the exhibition. Much to our amazement and horror, he didn’t add us to the show. We were so shocked – we’d taken it for granted. There were only four artists in London at the time, and we weren’t included. We thought we had to do something about it. If we couldn’t be in that show, what could we do? So we decided to do a living sculpture at the opening. We arrived in the evening with our heads and hands in bronze paint, and we stood there, and it stole the show. In some ways it wiped out the rest of the show. At the end of the evening, a young man came up to us and said, ‘My name’s Konrad Fischer, you’ll do something with me in Düsseldorf, no?’ He was the most famous art dealer in the world at the time. Artists would have cut their legs off to be invited by him back then.

GILBERT: So he arranged for us to be part of an exhibition called ‘Between’ in Düsseldorf. Marcel Broodthaers was there, as was some girl pouring sand. So we went over to Düsseldorf for the first time. Before that we hadn’t done a sculpture for more than two minutes, and we thought that we had to do it differently there – we have to show something! So we decided we would have a table, go up on it, and stay there for eight hours non-stop.

GEORGE: For as long as the museum was open.

GILBERT: That was a revolution. Even Beuys came to have a look. Everybody came to look. It was a sensation!

One of the world's leading scientists today, Luc Steels, was a student at Art & Project [Amsterdam] at the time. He said your arrival there had a major impact on him and was a factor in his becoming a scientist. Your work never leaves people indifferent.

GEORGE: We've always said we think people should be different when they go home from an exhibition. If there's not something different inside of them afterwards, then there's no reason to have visited the exhibition in the first place. We say it's like when you read a book that means a lot to you: perhaps you can't remember or tell a friend exactly what happened in the book, perhaps the story was too long, but you know there's a part inside of you that's different because you read the book – some tiny detail of humanistic thought.

When we had this show recently in Bregenz ['Gilbert & George', 2002], the editor of the newspaper was heard saying, 'This is the sort of art that drives children to shoot their schoolteachers!' Unbelievable.

GILBERT: We always made our art like manic people, always thinking of the next one, never looking back. That's how we did it, without analysing exactly what we were doing.

You were always pushing forward.

GILBERT: Yes, pushing forward, don't you think, George? Making it and showing it. Showing is the most important part for us. We prefer not to make it, but we have to do it because that's the only way to show it. But in the future maybe it will be simpler.

GEORGE: Normally our pictures are finished just in time for them to go on to the aeroplane to the gallery or the museum. So we don't tend to have works of art hanging around in the studio for months so you can touch them up or change them a little.

Walt Disney used to say that it's deadlines that make the world go round.

GEORGE: Certainly in the early days. We were always working at breakneck speed to meet deadlines.

GILBERT: We have a system for making each work of art, and once we decide on the system we cannot change it. That's it – you have to accept it. It's an amazingly good discipline to have to accept what you do.

Would you call it a method?

GILBERT: Yes, it has to be. Other artists might paint over it and start all over again. We don't do that. We've never done that, and we've never rejected an artwork we've made. What we've finished is finished.

GEORGE: We always say that it's taking embarrassment and awkwardness into the normal fabric of the world. So when we have an idea such as doing the 'New Horny Pictures' [2000] or drinking sculptures, if you think about it for four or five minutes, you'll reject the work because it's awkward, silly, or embarrassing. But if you do it, if you drag yourself out there and the pictures are done and they've been coloured and then they're being exhibited, suddenly in some way they become the most normal things in the world. They're there, we did them, and people can discuss them.

GILBERT: Embarrassment is very important. When we're embarrassed about what we're doing, then it works. We know that, and it terrifies us.

We've never spoken about that – how interesting. Embarrassment is another catalyst.

GILBERT: We are totally embarrassed. When we did 'The Naked Shit Pictures' we were totally embarrassed. Again and again.

GEORGE: One very good example is that one day we were designing a group of pictures and we wanted to make one picture that had just four leaves with drops of water on them [*Tears*, 1987]. We thought, 'This is too silly – it doesn't have us in the picture, it doesn't have a second subject, there's no

background, there's no foreground.' But rather than thinking for thirty seconds more, we just decided to do it. Right up until the moment of exhibiting it for the first time, it still felt like a slight picture without enough depth. And since then we've been amazed by how many people have come up to us and told us how much they like it and how much it meant to them. It connected with all of these people's lives.

GILBERT: The way we frame them has become so classic that we can use any subject and make it totally classic. When they're totally classic, they work in museums.

GEORGE: We know one thing very simply, which is that it's rude to choose!

GILBERT: It's rude to choose!

GEORGE: People and pictures, by the way!

One of the last questions I have is about Utopia. We've spoken about different catalysts for your work. Is Utopia one of these?

GEORGE: It's in the news now because the Chinese government is renaming a piece of territory Shangri-La. But of course, Shangri-La is a fictional invention from the East End of London, by a man living in Wood Green! We've created a lot of pictures which try to come to terms with that subject in some way. We did a beautiful picture *Here* [1987], and we did one called *There* [1987], and even one called *Here and There* [1989]. It's like a friend of ours who often says, 'Let's go to paradise', and we always tell him, 'Paradise is the here and now.' Sometimes he agrees with us, and sometimes he doesn't. One day he said, 'The best thing about paradise is that when you arrive, there are seventeen virgins waiting for you.' But I replied, 'You don't have to go to paradise for that – there are far too many already here in London!' Seventeen is nothing.

GILBERT: We always ask him what he regards as the best thing in life, which is utopian in a way. He came up with an amazing answer.

GEORGE: The most extraordinary reply.

GILBERT: 'Maybe craziness.'

Bloch and Adorno once had a conversation in which Bloch asserted, with regard to hope, that Utopia is connected to the idea of there being something missing. Perhaps we could talk about hope, as this is a common theme in your work.

GEORGE: I'm not sure whether we actually have a picture called 'Hope', but there is one called *Death Hope Life Fear*, which I think keeps hope in the right context. We're very simple. We are always hopeful of succeeding, and we never feel we succeed. It's very simple.

GILBERT: And we never give up. We try a new way to succeed every day. But we never look back. I don't think for one second that we're romantics. A lot of people believe we're romantic because we wear suits, but actually we're not! *[Laughs]*

That's an interesting paradox.

GEORGE: No, we're not romantic as artists at all. Maybe we're romantic with younger friends or something. We always feel that people very much need to hang on to that to be able to enjoy themselves, because if you lose that, then it's a downhill slide to total disaster. We have to keep some aspects of life that are amusing, things you can enjoy. If you don't, it's an enormous doorway into a huge disaster.

It's always about beginnings. It's never about routine; it's the opposite of routine. It's the first picture every day.

GEORGE: Losing our virginity every day!

GILBERT: We like the idea of being childish, of being silly. When we go out and enjoy ourselves, we can be totally silly, and this is our freedom.

Robert Louis Stevenson once said that art should be serious, but the way that children are serious when they play.

GEORGE: That's a very good quote.

Another issue related to Utopia is the notion of change.

GILBERT: That could be a true Utopia, to change the world in a better way. We don't know how, but everybody wants a better world. Trying to create a better world for ourselves – that must be Utopia. We're all alone here.

GEORGE: To rewrite the rules every day is a wonderful freedom and joy. We think stagnation and ideology set in stone are very cruel things for people. Like when you see people going to church, generation after generation after generation. Pushing this Jewish fairy story with its very limited perimeters controlling every aspect of their life, their marriage, their children, their position in society, their occupation, their working life ...

GILBERT: ... their sex life ...

GEORGE: ... it's an enormous all-over-the-body chastity belt in a way. It's a frightful thing, but artists and writers and film-makers and poets offer some hope by inventing their own rules and laws every day.

GILBERT: That's probably Utopia: to be able to free ourselves in a new way. 'Love thy neighbour' is our motto.

GEORGE: The only rule in life that we always keep is: 'Do whatever you like, but don't beat up your neighbour', to which I say, 'Yes, unless, of course, he enjoys it!'

The press archive

I'd like to ask you about your press archive.

GILBERT: We started it in 1969.

And they're all articles about you?

GILBERT: Yes, all of them. There must be thousands. It's interesting because the headlines change so much: first we were naive little boys making pictures, then we were like marshmallow aesthetes – all these crazy titles. Then it became nastier and nastier for a while! [*Laughs*]

Did it go back and forth between bad boys and good boys?

GILBERT: Not even that. It's more like 'Beauty and the Beast' – and all to do with shit ... So you don't even have to look at our pictures; you just read the titles to see exactly how we changed.

GEORGE: Here are some examples. In the early 70s, we had headlines like 'The Odd Couple', 'Make Mine a Double Sculpture' – that's a drinking reference – or 'Keep Stiff for Hours', which is a sexual innuendo connected with the living sculpture. Or there's 'Still Life on a Table' – that's an art one – 'Gilbert and George for High Tea', 'Living Statues', 'Gay Gordons' – that's another sexual/drinking one – 'The Art and Artlessness of Gilbert and George', 'Ever So Nice', 'Marshmallow Aesthetes'. Those are all typical of the 70s. Then, when the 80s came, the mood changed. Even without reading the articles, you can see just by reading the headlines how we changed and how the view of the press changed.

And the headlines often refer to titles of your works?

GEORGE: Or play with them in some way, yes.

Can you tell me more about how these headlines changed over time?

GEORGE: Absolutely. For instance, it already changed in the early 80s: 'Blood Hard Slaves of Beauty', 'Gilbert and George, Authoritarian Fascists or Missionaries of our Time?' – amazing! – 'Two Artists, a Single Mind', 'Strange Images from Two Artists Who are One', 'Two of a Kind', 'The Lure of Youth' – it's already getting rather threatening – 'Art Gangsters', 'To Believe is to See', 'Repressed Anguish and Rebellions', 'Twin Sons of Different Mothers Unleashing Primal Colours in Unison', 'Shake Hands with the Devil' – this is the mid 80s – 'Art That Holds the Minds', 'How English is It?', 'Is That You, God?'

GILBERT: I think no art has ever had such anarchistic titles between good and evil.

GEORGE: So to finish up the 80s: ‘Gilbert & George and Samuel Beckett’, ‘Our Fortress’, ‘The Melancholy Dandies’. But then, when you come to the 90s you have titles like these: ‘Victims of the British Disease’, ‘Doubles All Around’, ‘Fantastic and Terrible’, ‘Postcard Posers’, ‘Opening Hours’ – that’s another drinking reference – ‘The Return of the Russian Heroes’, ‘Opening a Window on Western Art’, ‘Stripped to the Bone’, ‘Unhappy with Double Vision’, ‘Himmelfahrt’, ‘The Evil of Banality’, ‘Red Leaves are Blossoming’, ‘This England is Not So Conservative’ – that’s from a Russian newspaper [*laughs*] – ‘Are You Serious, Sir?’ – that’s from Moscow, the Russian ones are very good – ‘The Cathedral of Melancholia’ ... There’s a very good title here from 1992, from Holland, it just says: ‘Fifty Dead Fucking Jesuses’ – it’s from a leading Dutch newspaper. [*Laughs*] The journalist was complaining about modern art. He asked us, ‘Do people really need to go see these modern exhibitions?’ We replied, ‘They don’t have to – they can go to the classical museums instead where they’ll see fifty fucking dead Jesuses – that’s more or less what every national museum has!’ So they used that as the headline.

Have you ever published or shown these archives?

GILBERT: No, never.

Do the headlines change again later in the 90s?

GILBERT: There we have ‘Double Take with the Cosmic Nerds’ – that’s very insulting – ‘The Art World Prepares for Gilbert & George’, ‘Tomorrow is a Cultural Reality’, ‘The Odd Couple That Comes Back and Forth’ – that’s Australia, of course – ‘Symbiosi Perfecta’, ‘Body Politics’, ‘Starkly Original Duo’, ‘Art with Knobs on’, ‘Boys Will be Boys’. They’re saying that to insult us.

GEORGE: ‘Depraved New World’, ‘Two of a Mind Who are One of a Kind’, ‘Bad Boys’ in 1993, ‘Who’s Afraid of Gilbert & George?’, ‘Cultural Revolution’ – that’s referring to China – ‘Art for the Smart’, ‘A View from Piccadilly’ – that’s charming – ‘To Judge or Not to Judge’, ‘Shanghai Surprise’, ‘Troubles with My Art’ – a lot of literary innuendoes – ‘We’re

Mental', 'Mushroom Picking with Gilbert & George'. Here we go with 1994 now: 'Soul Mates', 'Duo Infernal', 'Love and Decay' – that's a good one.

So they're organized by year?

GEORGE & GILBERT: Year, author, title, journal or magazine.

GEORGE: Here come 'The Naked Shit Pictures'. Where does it begin? Let's start here: 'The Naked Shit Pictures: We're Just Lonely, Miserable, Terrified People', 'Well That's Gilbert & George for You', 'Shit Parade' – that's a play on 'hit parade' for pop music – 'It's Enough to Drive You Potty' – that's another reference to the pot used for shitting – 'The Gilbert & George Talent for a Load of Tosh', 'Faecal Fulminations: All Mouth and No Trousers', 'Sorry, I Slept through It All', 'Faecal Attraction is Merely a Laugh', 'A Load of ...', 'Preoccupations with the Body's Crannies and Fluids Must Lead to the Cold Slab', 'The Suited Scatmen'. And then in 1995: 'The Naked Shit Sperm', 'Shock of the Poo', 'Shit Art', 'Such Tired Old Naughty Boys', 'A Pair of Old Scat Queens' and 'Naked Truth'.

GILBERT: The amazing thing is that they're trying to discriminate against us, totally – they would like to beat us up.

GEORGE: 'Scandalosi Gilbert & George', 'Seen and Not Turd', 'G is for Garbage' – that's a good one – 'Piss Shit Spunk', 'What an Achievement!', 'Those Dandies Break Taboos', 'A Recyclable World' – that's very good – 'Middle-aged Men Behaving Badly', 'The Bother-Boys', 'God Save the Shit' – amazing!

These headlines are often triggered by your titles.

GILBERT: Oh yes! We give them the freedom to write 'shit' for the first time, so they use it again and again.

GEORGE: This is a strange one – it's from Japan: 'Ageing Process Contributes to Beautiful Sculpture' – because they like old people in the Far East, right? The next one is 'Radical Bold Artwork by Nice Middle-aged

Gentlemen' – you see, they like older people in Japan. 'Two Poker-faced Jokers', 'Aunties Come Clean' – that's insulting.

GILBERT: Yes, some are quite insulting.

GEORGE: That's the cream of it. Amusing! So, that's one archive – our press archive.

Just show the world as it is

GEORGE: We have to tell you our favourite story of the month, which we read in the newspapers. It's a true story about George Bernard Shaw, who was interviewed on his ninetieth birthday. He agreed to a young journalist doing an interview. At the end of the interview, the young man said, 'Thank you very much, Mr Shaw. I hope very much to have the honour of interviewing you on your hundredth birthday.' Bernard Shaw replied, 'I don't see why not – you look quite healthy to me.' [*Laughs*]

I want to ask you about an element in the 'Hooligan Pictures' that appears in the new series for the New York show, and is even stronger there. It's not a distortion, but mirroring. Can you tell me more about this?

GEORGE: It's very simple – it's like the human brain, which is in two parts: the left lobe and the right lobe. Anyone with a pair of scissors and two copies of a magazine can do it: just cut down the middle, and instead of having a whole person, you have two left-hand sides or two right-hand sides. So we're never entirely in a picture.

GILBERT: But it's extraordinary how it comes to resemble abortions, don't you think? They look like deformed people – something that went wrong.

GEORGE: It's like a new truth, a new way of seeing. And this is our picture called *nows*. They're just the billboards outside different newsagents we selected. *Nature*, with our green tongues; *Fingers*, this is one of the first

pictures using tags, but not reinvented; *Luck*. These are all advertisements that promise you happiness, wealth and the defeat of your enemies.

GILBERT: We think it's very interesting, because even if they don't like some of the new pictures for New York, I think all the tailors will say, 'Nobody has suits like that. They look unbelievable. Did you see what the suits look like?'

GEORGE: I think it may even inspire tailoring – a new way of using cloth on the body.

It certainly wouldn't be the first time you've anticipated a new development in your work. It's something I've always connected with your work – the fact that it produces reality.

GILBERT: Oh yes, it creates a totally new world, don't you think? Extraordinary!

There's a layering of themes, of content, and also of forms. Would you describe it as a palimpsest?

GEORGE: We hadn't thought of that word, but it's a very good one, yes. What is the dictionary definition of 'palimpsest'?

It's something with a variety of layers beneath the surface – like old pieces of parchment where the writing was scraped off and the pages were reused over and over again.

GILBERT: We distorted what everybody is doing now – this tagging. Every young person all over the world is going round and tagging, but we make the tagging into something ...

GEORGE: ... beautiful. We tidy it up. That all came, in fact, from the pubic lice; that's what started the whole idea.

GEORGE: We used pubic lice in the 'E1' pictures. We know there's a great prejudice against them – nobody loves them. They don't even exist in any museum in the world. They're discredited, hated.

GILBERT: These titles, like Apostasia, are all based on rebels, outsiders.

GEORGE: That's why we called them Perversive Pictures because we hope they'll be able to redirect the viewers and help them take another direction. 'Ishmael' has the same meaning.

There are several things in these new pictures I wanted to ask you about. One is the titles: there's a new religious dimension. Is it related to the re-emergence of new forms of fundamentalism?

GEORGE: Yes. We always felt that modern artists ignored religion because they said they were atheists, but they had to accept the fact that so-called 'ordinary' people go to church in enormous numbers all over the world. But we want to deal with religion.

GILBERT: Which pictures do this?

GEORGE: Many of them.

GILBERT: Not too many.

GEORGE: *Die Buff Die!* is taken directly from the mosque. The church, the mosque, and the factory in *Sky Tag* are another example.

GEORGE: We also love to use the tags because we realize that the central government and local governments are opposed to tagging. There's an enormous campaign: the London Underground and British Rail are all campaigning against tagging.

Would you say that you celebrate the taggers?

GEORGE: Absolutely. Like we celebrated the chewing gums that everyone hated.

GILBERT: They are the shit.

You have an incredible archive of tags.

GEORGE: We have thousands of images to project, literally thousands.

The digital pictures are printed out, literally, but at the same time you sign them. I wanted to ask you about this – it seems to be something in your works that hasn't changed.

GEORGE: Well, it hasn't changed in the respect that the pictures always start with the negative image and end up as a picture in a gallery or museum. We've always done it that way.

GILBERT: But now we take the image and we scan it instead of projecting it with an enlarger. That's the big difference. Once you scan it, you can do whatever you want with it. Of course, we were also able to do certain kinds of things with the enlarger, but it was very limited. Now, once you take the image apart, you can do whatever you want. We used to have this colourating – a layer of yellow or red. But now the computer has layers like this – it feels like it's been designed especially for us. But we only do one, and only the real piece is signed, and that's it. In some ways it's another list; it's like writing with images and is very personal. The negatives are words – visual words you put together to create a story.

Is it faster with digitalization?

GEORGE: Not exactly faster. I think the previous technique was very laborious, but I don't think the actual length of time is different. The difference is that you don't have to do all this handwork.

All these exhibitions are like chapters in a novel.

GILBERT: All the exhibitions are chapters in a novel, and it all produces reality. We like the whole idea of total schizophrenia, don't you think, George? We don't want to know what it means – we're just doing it, and we don't even ask the question 'What does it mean?'

GEORGE: We won't see the pictures in their totality until we arrive in New York and they're on the wall. We didn't even lay them out this time. We wanted to let the pictures make themselves as much as possible.

GILBERT: Every day we were so shocked, and the next day we already had to do the next piece. It was extraordinary – a dream-like journey and never reality. You see a dream, you see something that is already passé, and you already start to see something new in front of you.

Another new thing in your pictures is that you both appear very often as ghosts. I'd never seen this in your works before.

GEORGE: We like to say that, in the last three groups of pictures, we only appear in three states: normal, disturbed or dead. That sums up life roughly anyway. During some parts of your life you're normal, sometimes you're disturbed, and one day we're all dead.

They talk about the ages of man, and in that context, I think 'normal', 'disturbed' and 'dead' is very good. We also realized that when people discuss art and artists, most of the artists we are talking about are dead. But you don't think of them as dead – you even use the word 'late' for a dead person if you're referring to a relative: 'my late aunt' or 'my late grandmother'. But you never say 'the late Van Gogh' or 'the late Rembrandt' because they're still alive somehow.

What role does chance play in the way you work?

GEORGE: The mirroring simply came because when we used the pubic lice, we realized that people are rather squeamish about them: when they see lice in the gallery they think, 'Ugh! They're dirty, immoral or unpleasant.' So we wanted to tidy the pubic lice up by using mirror images to make them heraldic and respectable – like in a royal family's coat of arms. We wanted to make them grander, to celebrate them in a way.

GILBERT: That's it. After that George said we didn't want to show a normal image ever again!

That's a new motto.

GEORGE: Absolutely: never normal again.

Édouard Glissant pioneered the idea of creolization, which means that language becomes impure. I think this is very much what's happening in your work – a type of creolization.

GEORGE: I was reading an article a few years ago that claimed – I am sure quite truthfully – that the scrollwork done by monks in these handmade books came from drunkenness. They were all making wines and beers, these monks, and they were drinking. And when you're intoxicated, you feel these strange, swirling, abstract shapes. I'm sure it comes from that.

GILBERT: It's very exciting because it's both political and not political, don't you think? A lot of artists want to use politics to be against this, against that. We don't do that. We never did that. We just have this schizophrenic idea of thoughts – that's it. Like when you walk up and down Brick Lane – it's all mixed up.

That's politics for you?

GILBERT: Yes, all mixed up.

GEORGE: Crazy mixed-up kids from the 60s! [*Laughter*]

Does drawing still play a role in your work?

GEORGE: Well, we still do some numbering and very rough sketches, even using this new system.

The sketches are becoming more and more perfect now. In fact, they're totally perfect because we have to create the real piece from the sketch. When you do the real piece, it's very difficult to manoeuvre the images – it takes a long time. So you need a very good design you won't have to think about too much.

Tell me, what's the name of the man who runs this restaurant – the one where we always meet here?

GEORGE: Darren?

We should ask Darren to ask you a question for the interview. It's like a Russian matryoshka doll – we'll have an interview within an interview.

GEORGE: Or Russian roulette! *[Laughs]*

Darren! Would you mind asking Gilbert and George a question for our interview?

DARREN: Ask them a question? You've put me on the spot!

Something you've always wanted to ask them – the thing you always wanted to know about Gilbert & George.

DARREN: Which painting that you've done do you like the most?

GEORGE: It's rude to choose!

There are too many. The newest ones are the most important ones. I really believe that. We've done some fantastic ones recently. Do you know tagging?

DARREN: Yes.

GILBERT: We've done fantastic tagging. It's very good because every borough like Tower Hamlets tries to clean it all up, and we put it into the galleries and sell it. Don't you think it's exciting, George? Nobody likes chewing gum, but we did images of chewing gum and sold them. *[Laughs]*

Great – thanks for your question, Darren!

GILBERT: Sweet.

GEORGE: There's not much that makes Darren blush! *[Laughs]*

GILBERT: True. *[Laughs]*

Now that this new series of pictures is underway and you've got the computer working for you rather than the other way round, what are your unrealized projects? It's my recurrent question – the only one I always ask.

GEORGE: We still have Venice to come, a complete pictures book to come, the Tate Modern to come. We have enormous plans.

A complete pictures book will be very interesting because in your case it will not just be a catalogue – a résumé of all your works – but something of a novel. I think it will be fascinating.

GILBERT: It will be a novel because it's totally our way of thinking, our way of looking at the world. It's like writing about this, writing about that. Don't you think from year to year everything is changing? Not every artist has that – they don't have these waves coming and going.

GEORGE: There are different ways of doing a complete pictures book. There's obviously the exhaustive, complete kind, but there's also the possibility of doing five pictures from every year, or a little book with one picture carefully chosen from each year. Either would be fantastic.

The titles would be interesting.

GEORGE: Just gathering all the titles together would be extraordinary.

I think of you both also being the great novelists of our time.

GEORGE: They always say that the great novels are pictures painted with words, so ours must be the opposite. Our novels are written with images. But I think the extraordinary thing is that we can sit there and consider all the conventions we're terrified by – we can attack conventions, applaud traditions, whatever we want. It's like a musician who plays only one instrument, a piano, but can make you feel very sad, or very happy, or create different landscapes or feelings of love or misery – all on the one machine. You can evoke all of life with one piano. You can bring the ocean into the audience's mind, or love, or desire.

You can accelerate, you can slow down, you can have sequences, you can have stills and silences. That's also very important.

GEORGE: The machine is the interesting thing.

GILBERT: And it looks so modern. All these young artists – in some way, they all use one colour image, one colour photograph. That's mostly what they do. They don't make compositions; they don't write novels.

There's a story by Borges where a painter spends his whole life painting, and on the last day, after having painted for maybe a hundred years, he steps back and sees an enormous self-portrait. It's a Borgesian job, of sorts.

GILBERT: The exciting thing is that it's always the surrounds of Fournier Street. Nothing we do is based on having to fly to India to take images – nothing. Just up and down Brick Lane or Fournier Street.

Basically you reveal the invisible city by switching between these micro and macro perspectives.

GEORGE: That's the difference between Cézanne and Van Gogh – and why we prefer Van Gogh, because he would use any corner of any field or any back yard, whereas Cézanne was always in this special valley – a sort of beauty spot. Van Gogh didn't need that: he could use any café, any dirty corner, anything – a section of the beach or a part of a street, some funny old churchyard or the asylum.

'The Dirty Words Pictures' were very political when they were first shown, and today they are still political, but in a very different way. Do you think works of art that deal with politics are necessarily ambiguous?

GEORGE: We've never liked the word 'ambiguous', because we think this is something that journalists have accused us of. They say, 'We don't know where you stand because your pictures are ambiguous.' We like the word 'multi-layered'. Multi-layered is what they are. There are many levels on which a picture can be seen. A child will see a picture in a different way from a standard journalist or a ninety-year-old lady. They will all see the pictures from their own perspective on life.

GILBERT: When we make a political work, we never say, 'We like the right', or 'We like the left.' We never say that – we just put it in. We're putting in this leaflet of Haram, for example. It's against the law for Islamic people to vote in England, so when you put that in, you don't have to say anything. It's extraordinary.

GEORGE: It's powerful.

GILBERT: It's powerful because they tell you it's against the law – it's a sin to vote for white people. So you don't have to say anything. Just including it is enough.

GEORGE: It's very important to acknowledge that this view exists in society. There's no point in shoving it to one side. Let's deal with it. It's a democracy: you're allowed to have any view. So these people have this view; let's put it in the gallery as well.

GILBERT: You only have to say 'gay vicar'. That's it. We don't have to be for or against it. It's extraordinary.

GEORGE: Or if you say 'lesbian pope' – that's another very good one.

Do you have any other examples?

GEORGE: Let's think. 'Gay vicar' or 'lesbian pope' are two very good ones, I must say. 'Heterosexual art dealer' is another strange one. *[Laughter]*

GILBERT: George, tell him about all the French journalists.

GEORGE: We have a French book coming out, so we have had a heap of journalists from France. They all came with one standard question: 'What do you think about gay marriage?' Every single one of them. When the first young lady asked the question, I said, 'Why, are you thinking of marrying a queer?' *[Laughter]* Then, when the next journalist, a young man, asked me the same thing, I looked astonished and replied, 'Is this a proposal?' *[Laughter]*

GILBERT: You see, we don't have to say what we think. We just show the world as it is.

GEORGE: It has to do with the real ...

GILBERT: ... not with what we think.

GEORGE: Yes. It's not that we don't have feelings about these things. But the point is that we're not laying down the law. We are not aggressively anti-government, anti-global or anti-anything. We are for things, we are pro-things.

GILBERT: Positive.

GEORGE: Positive about the complexity and richness of the world. Thank goodness there are people who have every weird thought in the world – I think that's good.

The streets of London

To prepare for this interview, I was rereading this very astonishing publication that sums up the 'London EI Pictures' like this: 'From art for all to Brick Lane to city to cockney to dirty to docks to fiction to history to Gothic to Green to immigration to Jack the Ripper to maps to marginality to neighbourhood to religion to street-writing to strikes to textile to violence.' So I'd like to start by asking you about the city and the role it plays in your work.

GILBERT: Well, we really are city boys. We only like big cities. If we're outside a city for half an hour we're lost; we don't like it, especially because George always believes that once you're in the greens you become a different kind of person – you don't understand people any more. We always get very nervous after a few days if we're in a city where everybody is white and middle class. We want to get back to the turmoil of the modern world.

GEORGE: We always believe that an excessive love of nature leads to totalitarianism. [*Laughter*] In fact, we can prove the dangers of nature, because we once went to visit our late friend Daniel Farson in a very beautiful village in north Devon, and we stayed in a neighbouring hotel. We got up early in the morning because we wanted to see the estuary with the beautiful river birds. The whole village was very quiet, and the sun was just coming out. We came up the village high street, and there was the lovely parish church with the bees buzzing around the graves. Outside of the churchyard was a beautiful young couple with a small baby in a pram. And it looked so sweet, so perfect, such a wonderful part of the world, completely ideal and exquisite. We turned and said, ‘Good morning’, and the young man turned and said, ‘Fuck off, you weird-looking twats.’ [*Laughter*]

REM KOOLHAAS: Nevertheless, I can remember a kind of hand-drawn series of yourselves in the middle of nature with extremely lyrical proclamations – it’s one of your most beautiful works. Was that an earlier life?

GILBERT: Ah! That was before we discovered alcohol! Can you imagine? [*Laughter*]

GEORGE: Probably as baby artists we had a problem facing the city and other people, so we used nature. But it wasn’t really nature – it was always the London parks or Kew Gardens. No farther than that. And then I think in the mid 70s we suddenly realized that the reality around us – the chaos of the streets, the people – had so much more to offer.

GILBERT: That’s why to understand London we always take a bus to the end of the line and walk back towards Fournier Street. It’s extraordinary.

GEORGE: The 133 is one of our favourites. We get off at Streatham, but it goes even further. We have lovely coffees in Arab cafés there, where they’re extremely friendly.

GILBERT: And sometimes we used to make a list of streets from, say, Liverpool [Street] to Crystal Palace. It was an extraordinary walk.

GEORGE: All on one postcard that tells you when to turn left, just like those machines they now have in cabs. It was exactly like that, all on one postcard. So we walked from Fournier Street to Anerley to have lunch with someone. It took all morning, and we just had this one small postcard.

GILBERT: The city is just extraordinary, especially in the east of London. Walking up Kingsland Road or Commercial Street – the urban streets of London are just incredible. Last night we took a bus back at ten o'clock; in front of us it was like Faliraki. Have you heard of Faliraki? Unbelievable! Misbehaviour in a big way. Just thousands of people outside in the open at ten o'clock. Extraordinary!

GEORGE: There are dozens and dozens of people literally sitting in the gutter in our street. They're all very middle-class people. They are not cockneys, they are not rough, they are not aggressive. They're all people who are training to be doctors – or architects! [*Laughter*] One of the pubs at the end of the street is exclusively for drugs, and it's totally accepted – no police interfere. People just go there for drugs; it's extraordinarily modern in that way. We used to describe London in the 70s as the city that was the most stressful, and we rather liked that because we were very stressed. We said you just have to look at the thousands of people emerging from Liverpool Street Underground in the morning: they're all frowning and worrying, and they're all desperate that they have to go and do this terrible office job. This is no longer true, though. They're all coming out of the Underground now with their friends, full of music. You can't tell the difference between the builder and the young city man going off to the gym before work. It's all much more democratic, much friendlier, and very safe.

GILBERT: But the rucksacks. We're quite against the rucksacks, because whenever you go in cafés, people have these enormous rucksacks, and when they turn they smack you in the face. [*Laughter*]

RK: I agree. Rucksacks make mankind twice as voluminous.

GEORGE: It's dangerous on the escalators, as well. You get on just behind someone, and one third of the way up the escalator, they push you over backwards.

We're having a series of protests throughout this long night. We started with Eric Hobsbawm's protest against forgetting; Gustav Metzger will protest against too much air travel in the art world; and here we have a protest against the rucksack.

There's been a lot of discussion about the impossibility of making a synthetic image of something as complex as London. Very early on, you found the whole world within these streets.

GEORGE: Yes.

Could you possibly tell us more about this?

GILBERT: We've always said that Liverpool Street is Jerusalem for us. The best way to see London is to go up to Crouch End and look down – it's a golden city, just extraordinary. Don't you think, George?

GEORGE: You can see all the way through to Docklands and everything. Every major building stands out from there. It's amazing.

GILBERT: Like Alice in Wonderland. We believe the East End of London is, in some way, the centre of the world at the moment. If you understand the East End, you understand the world. I really believe that because everybody is there. Everybody. There are thousands of different languages being spoken and a thousand different people. George is the only English person there. *[Laughter]*

RK: It's really a very striking difference: the two of you are optimistic in a very robust way. Has your single, combined identity affected this, making it easier to be optimistic or to resist anxiety?

GEORGE: I'm sure that's true, yes. Being two removes self-doubt. Normally the artist looks at the empty canvas and thinks, 'What am I going to do? What am I going to do next? Should I put another cow in the field? Should I

lower the sunset?’ And there’s no reply. When there are two of you, there’s always someone there to say, ‘Oh, put another cow in, go on!’ [*Laughter*]

RK: Is the fact that you work together – and have been working together for such a long time – also the secret of your work’s consistency? Is it also the secret of its longevity and freshness?

GILBERT: I think it’s based in madness. It has to be combined: totally organized and totally disorganized – that’s it. But in the end we don’t care. We have to liberate ourselves totally.

GEORGE: Normally it’s mixed-gender couples who ask, ‘What’s your secret?’ And we reply, ‘It’s a secret!’ [*Laughter*]

RK: I think part of it has to do with repetition. A large part of your life – I can testify as a witness – is spent in very repetitive, almost ritualistic moments that seem to be identical every day.

GEORGE: More evolution than repetition, I would say, wouldn’t you, Gilbert?

GILBERT: Yes, we are like monks. Every day, George gets up at five o’clock or five thirty to read dirty books, and we always have breakfast at half past six. We start working at half past seven. We stop at exactly five o’clock, and we start walking at seven o’clock to our restaurant. Eight o’clock we arrive at the restaurant, even when George sometimes takes a different route. At ten o’clock we leave and take bus number 67, and at ten thirty we arrive back at Fournier Street. And that’s it. It’s the same every single day, except when we have to go out and entertain people.

GEORGE: Or like this morning.

Obviously, the morning brings breakfast to mind, but also newspapers. One of the things we discussed a lot in our previous conversations about London was your amazing archive of different newspapers, so I wanted to ask you about this.

GEORGE: A recent story we really love is about our favourite newspaper seller at Liverpool Street, whom we’ve known for forty years. The only

thing we've ever said to him is, 'Good morning.' Then we buy a newspaper, and he says, 'Good morning, Guv.' And that was it for forty years until one morning recently when he said, 'Here, Guv, have you heard this one?' And he said, 'My sister Lily is a whore down Piccadilly. Me mother is another down the Strand. My father sells his asshole down the Elephant and Castle. We're the finest fucking family in the land.' We think that's an amazing thing to hear from someone you've only ever been polite to. [*Laughter*] I asked him, 'Would you write it down for me?' He said, 'It's only a bit of fun, you know, Guv.' [*Laughter*]

RK: Last year in Venice I was completely amazed by the impact of Arabic script on your work and the sense that you had embarked on something completely new. Can you tell us more about this?

GEORGE: We're surrounded by foreign-language newspapers. There are dozens and dozens of Arabic, Hindu and Bengali scripts all around us that we don't understand, but I think it's very important to use them because somebody can understand it. It doesn't matter to us that we can't understand it. It's all a big confusion. For instance, we did a picture called *Mullah*, which means a Muslim priest, in 1980, and from that day on everyone used to ask us, 'Why *Mullah*? What does "mullah" mean?' And then those two aeroplanes went into the buildings in New York, and nobody has asked us what a mullah is ever since because from that moment on, everyone knew. The world is changing in that way, and we want to show that we can be with it.

GILBERT: Every time we see these mullahs, I always see this finger coming at you. I would always like to cut off this finger, because they're always pointing at you.

GEORGE: Yes.

GILBERT: The mullahs on television. It's an extraordinary idea. Just preaching. And that's why I never like a priest any more. I was brought up a Catholic, and they all did the same: all this pointing the finger at you. I will

try to cut off that finger one day. But I think our biggest revolution is because we have taught ourselves to do it all on computer.

GEORGE: It's extraordinary.

GILBERT: It's the new brain for us. We transport our ideas directly on to the screen.

Could you tell us more about this?

GEORGE: I think we probably took a year to change over, between 2001 and 2002.

GILBERT: We stopped working for one year because we had to research what we could actually do. It was very difficult because computers were not powerful enough. We were not able to make big pictures. But now it's unbelievable.

GEORGE: In fact, we started with the 'London E1 Pictures' – those were the first pictures created with the computer. A lot of people have asked us if we miss the old darkroom, but we say, 'Not at all. We're very happy.' We don't have to get up early in the morning to switch on all the water, and we no longer have the horrible smell of all the chemicals. And we were working for twelve hours completely in the dark. We were very happy to leave that behind. The only thing we miss is the rubber gloves. [*Laughter*]

In what other ways has this changed how you work?

GEORGE: It has given us enormous freedoms.

GILBERT: In some way, we are the total artwork from the beginning to the end: we design the installation, we design the catalogue, we design the artwork. When we go to the museum to put up the art, we have total artwork. Nobody is involved except us.

GEORGE: We even send away our assistant when we're designing the new pictures because we want to be totally alone at that time.

GILBERT: Except recently – we had two or three helpers. They were all architects. It's very funny because we prefer architects to artists. Artists are more dangerous. So they did all the scanning for this big book that we are doing with one thousand two hundred pages, maybe two thousand images. And we did all the proofs in Fournier Street. It was an extraordinary job.

GEORGE: But that was only possible because we weren't creating pictures at the time. If we had been, we wouldn't have been able to have people like that around.

One of the questions I must have asked you at least ten times already, but which I'll ask you again today, is about your unrealized projects. What are Gilbert & George's unbuilt roads?

GEORGE: We do what we want? [*Laughter*] There are lots of projects waiting one day.

GILBERT: We are doing it. We are doing what we want every day. That's it. I think that Aleister Crowley said that once.

GEORGE: ‘“Do what thou wilt” shall be the whole of the law,’ I think.

What about the future? How do you see the future?

GILBERT: Ah, we've told you that already many, many times. We want to be there in the future. Every single day. There is nothing more exciting than that!

GEORGE: We are all doomed! [*Laughter*]

Art for all

We were speaking about the Serpentine Interview Marathon, and you said you had some important advice about the next one.

GEORGE: Yes, because your marathon preceded another London marathon, which was another first: it was the Masturbation Marathon, which took

place near Old Street, very near here. It had cards, posters and everything – and people came from all over Britain and all over Europe.

To compete?

GEORGE: Yes, to compete. We didn't attend it, but we would have liked to. We tried to collect enough cards to make a postcard piece, but we didn't. Maybe next year we'll do that.

But you have cards of it.

GEORGE: Absolutely. But we think it was rather sexist because it was only a male masturbation marathon, though we're not sure of that.

Where were the cards made?

GEORGE: The cards were very beautiful and very formal, like social stationery.

GILBERT: I thought there were big posters. I can't remember very well.

GEORGE: Maybe your next marathon could be linked to the Masturbation Marathon so that people from both sides could come together. When I say 'come together' ... ha ha! Oh, my God! We didn't even find out who the winner of the marathon was, because obviously with a marathon there's a winner.

There wasn't with our marathon, but people loved you the most.

GEORGE: We might have been the winner.

I received an email today from John Brockman. He asked a number of leading scientists to tell him reasons for being optimistic. I thought it was an interesting question. What would you say the reasons are for being optimistic?

GEORGE: We find no reason to be pessimistic, I'd say.

GILBERT: Because we realize through art that all the visions, all these crazy ideas that you have as a child, are things you can fulfil. It's a dream, art,

don't you think? You can make the real or the unreal, but you are inventing your own world. I have no problem with anything. Just being alive is unbelievable.

GEORGE: Even the privilege of contemporary life is unparalleled. Such privileges never existed before. We should rejoice.

GILBERT: It's a non-stop journey, because we never look back – we always look forward. Next, next, next. We fight this enormous battle to be able to end up on the other side. [*Laughs*]

GEORGE: When we first managed to kick in the door of the Tate, we asked ourselves, 'A retrospective – what does that mean in the world?' It means very little. If you go on the street and say 'retrospective', people will think you're talking about a rocket. It only really means something in the hard-core art world. It took us a long time to arrive at the new title 'Major Exhibition'. 'Retrospective' is not democratic – it means nothing. Even 'survey show', as they call it, means nothing to the general public.

How did you come up with the title?

GILBERT: They did it for us because they were writing this introduction for the ordinary Tate catalogue, and in every introduction it was referred to as a 'major exhibition', so we decided to use that phrase, too.

GEORGE: They were writing it in-house, not for the general public. The moment we stole it, they didn't like it. They even wanted to remove it.

GILBERT: [*Laughs*] Altogether it's been an amazing experience. I don't understand how we managed to do it. I really believe the past forty years have been one mad journey – completely schizophrenic. We just keep on working and never look back. It's like a journey of your different beliefs. That's why we can do the next one. We still believe. Every day.

So it's only just begun.

GEORGE: It's only beginning.

GILBERT: Every image of us is roughly confronting the universe. It's always looking into the abyss. We've never done art that's based on art.

That's really one of the unifying themes of the 'Major Exhibition'.

GEORGE: I think that will be evident. I'm sure people will see that.

GILBERT: None of our artworks refers to other people's art. We've never done that. That's why we are sometimes quite critical about artists who use other people's art to entertain each other.

GEORGE: We still believe in the old idea of 'art for all' – that as an artist you should be able to do something democratic, like a surgeon or a scientist has to do something that has an application for life.

Could we talk about Waking [1984]? It was in the 80s that you started to make these gigantic pictures, wasn't it?

GEORGE: That was one of the first large pictures, yes. We always think that waking is one of the most important moments in a person's life. It's the beginning of a new day. Welsh people call the early morning 'morning wood' because every man wakes up with a hard-on. In Wales it's called 'morning wood'. And sex advisers always say if you have a problem with your erection, do it in the morning. It's also the time when everyone has their first idea for the day. When a young artist asks, 'What would you advise us?' we always say, 'When you wake up in the morning, sit on the edge of the bed, don't open your eyes, and ask yourself, "What do I want to say to the world today?"' It doesn't matter whether you work with a computer, a brush or a pencil – just decide that, and you'll be fine.'

Is that your most important piece of advice to young artists?

GEORGE: Well, we also have a second piece of advice, because normally they're students. So we say, 'Fuck the teachers.' Because the teachers are the enemy. All teachers have one great fear in their life, which is that one of their students will go on to become a rich and successful artist. It's something they dread.

GILBERT: I think the most important thing is waking up in the morning and looking into the abyss – looking into the universe. As you're waking, it's just space in front of you. In some ways, we manage to slow down life in our works, to make it more complete. That's what we try to do: slow life down so you can think about it.

So it's an eternal moment.

GEORGE: Past, present and future. We always believe that art should be all three things together. We were saying earlier with the 'Bomb Pictures' – we had taken images of the London plane trees for years and years and years, but hardly ever used them, except sometimes for the leaves. It was only when we came to create the 'Bomb Pictures' that we realized they are the greatest, tallest living things in London. They've always been there, they are here, and they always will be here – the greatest natural symbol of continuity. They're like the natural version of the monarchy. We never research subjects until we have completed using them. It's like the 'Ginkgo Pictures' – we found out so much about ginkgo leaves, but only after we made the pictures.

GILBERT: It was very funny because we took images of the leaves for many years, but we never knew what the name of the tree was.

It's interesting that you do the research afterwards, unlike in many situations in art history. If you look for example at [Théodore] Géricault, he researched The Raft of Medusa, making sketches and reading lots of books before he did the painting. With you it's the opposite.

GEORGE: We're never inspired in that way. We always find things that are similar or agreeable to what we're interested in. We always quote the famous story about Henry Moore. He was interviewed by a journalist at his home and studio in the 50s, and as the journalist was leaving the house, he saw a collection of interesting pebbles that Henry Moore had picked up on the beach or in the fields, and the journalist said, 'Ah, so that's where you

get your ideas from – from these strange stones!’ Henry Moore replied, ‘I collect these pebbles because they look like my sculptures.’

GILBERT: When we went to New York we found these trees. We wondered what the hell they were, because the leaves smelled so much like shit. We collected hundreds of leaves and brought them back with us.

GEORGE: We were in New York for more than a week, and we pressed the ginkgo leaves between the pages of the telephone directory in the hotel and thought we could take them back like that. Being idiotically honest, I said, ‘We can’t steal the telephone book from the hotel room’, so we went out and bought some magazines, which we were buying anyway, because there are some very good adult magazines you can buy in New York, and we took them back between the pages of the adult magazines. We thought either we would be seized for bringing natural fruit or something into the country, or because of the magazines. In the end, we weren’t seized for either, thankfully.

GILBERT: We actually knew nothing about the ginkgo tree. We made the pictures, and then we wanted to find out what it was – this tree where the leaves look like gold.

We are back to the pictures here, to Waking.

GEORGE: The title is actually misspelled – the ‘n’ was left out ...

What was the best decision you’ve ever made?

GILBERT: To move away from the art world. I really think that saved us. It allowed us to be independent.

GEORGE: Alone.

GILBERT: Yes, that’s it.

Would you call it liberating?

GILBERT: Totally.

When did that happen?

GILBERT: A long time ago. We didn't go to any of the art shows or any of that. In the beginning, we wanted to be included, to be part of it all. But they didn't like us – they didn't want us. We were getting too drunk and all this stuff, so they didn't like us. They would never invite us back. We were isolated.

So it was a type of salvation.

GILBERT: Oh yes, it was.

GEORGE: As Konrad Fischer always said, 'You are something different.'

But did he mean that in a positive way?

GEORGE: He did and he didn't. The whole art world is like the shifting sands. We think we are more central now than we ever were. I don't think there are many baby minimalist artists around us. I don't think there are any. They don't exist. *[Laughs]*

GILBERT: It's funny because Konrad said this about us, but also about another artist, Bruce Nauman. Bruce Nauman didn't fit into the New York school of artists because he came from Los Angeles, so all the other artists – all the minimalist artists – didn't want him to be part of that. We and Bruce Nauman were the outsiders.

And now we've reached 2006 and the journey leads to the show in 2007, so this may be the moment to ask my favourite question: what are your unrealized projects?

GEORGE: Endless. Endless.

GILBERT: We don't ever think like that. It's just the next project. We are full of images: we have hundreds and hundreds of images on many subjects. We never have big dreams like that – we just take one step at a time. We don't invent anything. It's like looking into the abyss, looking into the empty space.

So you don't have one big, unrealized Utopia?

GEORGE: There is no plan, no plan.

GILBERT: Just one step: the next step.

GEORGE: The next way to shag them!

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

Growing up in Switzerland, I saw Louise Bourgeois's work early on, and I studied her books. When I went to New York as a student, in the late 1980s, I rang her up and went to visit her in her Chelsea house. I was very interested in her literature: the diaries, poems and songs that she had written, and I edited a book of her writings years later with Marie-Laure Bernadac. In my early meetings with Bourgeois, she talked a lot about the idea of the personnage périphérique: people who are not central to our lives, but who – sometimes in only one conversation – change us.

After I edited her book, we worked together on a number of projects, including one with agnès b. One of the things that happens when you work with an artist regularly are lots of short conversations, filled with brief insights into various aspects of their practice, most of which don't end up in print. Here is one such fragment – literally just a snippet. I wanted to include it because it's particularly unusual. It was recorded during my last visit. At the start of the meeting she announced she'd rather respond to the questions with drawings as she was tired of talking. We continued like this (my asking questions and her responding with drawings by email) and had planned to make a book of this, but sadly Louise died a few months later and so the project remains unrealized, although here you can read nearly two hundred words.

Peripheral figures

HANS ULRICH OBRIST *Could you say something about the peripheral figure?*

LOUISE BOURGEOIS: To illustrate the way these peripheral figures have been stripped of importance – they have sunk into oblivion, then quite suddenly they re-emerge – I'm talking about the character who appears in one of my works [of the 1940s] with the title *Portrait of Catherine Yarrow*. I haven't thought about Catherine Yarrow in twenty years. Then a young historian finds out what the two letters CY stand for, and we reconstruct the personality of Catherine Yarrow. The peripheral figure now becomes central.

She was latent.

LB: I had almost forgotten her until the historian saw a photograph in a book of a very old piece called *Catherine Yarrow*, full of nails. So the peripheral figure becomes visible. There is no need to 'investigate' her true identity and find out the importance of her role. Catherine Yarrow was never anyone's wife, because she is defined solely by the effect that I had on her and she had on me; this belongs to the same theme as Eugénie Grandet, who for me is the prototype of the unfulfilled woman. Eugénie Grandet is a character in Balzac; she is the prisoner of her father, who needed a domestic servant. Catherine Yarrow represents the destiny of a woman who has never had the opportunity to be a woman. I met her at a time when I had three young children, and I made a huge impression on her because I was the pregnant woman. Perhaps I provoked such a great reaction because she wanted to be pregnant. I don't know. As a result, Catherine Yarrow made a desperate effort to be kind, to be sociable, to be acceptable, but the tension under which she lived made her hysterical.

Was her hysteria manifested in any way?

LB: Yes, violently so. She was completely impossible to cope with. As a result, Catherine Yarrow was a peripheral person who occupied an important place in my life at a certain time.

This idea of a peripheral figure is very interesting: the oscillation between centre and periphery, between appearing and disappearing.

LB: Yes, good. It should be noted here that we reconstruct these peripheral figures by way of our desire to rectify. I have a passion for rectification, which I see as a way of making amends.

These peripheral figures; how would you see them in relation to other people you knew a long time ago?

LB: Peripheral figures form a kind of network between themselves; the network has to do with a certain date because it was all together, one stitch links into another. If you pull, it comes undone, like lace.

All the people you met years ago; people like Fernand Léger. Is he part of this peripheral world, or is he in the centre?

LB: No, that's different, because there I feel an affection. I have a wide acquaintanceship, and I have many memories of my teachers; I loved my teachers. Those other people were not on the same level at all. Catherine Yarrow was a society woman. I met her socially. She had no connection with my serious, professional life. She had a kind of position in the artistic community because she typified a certain hobbyist who circulates in the art world. It gives her a *raison d'être*.

So with the peripheral figures, would you say that they were people you met by chance?

LB: Not at all. I met her because she was at a loose end. She was flabbergasted by the physical proximity of a pregnant woman. She made her damn crockery.

From one moment to the next, something insignificant can acquire great importance.

LB: Absolutely. That's when an exhibition opening turns into a street event, a public event. There is another peripheral figure, called the Albino. An albino is someone whose colour, whose pigmentation, has been affected by his or her genes. The pigmentation of the skin, the hair, the eyes are red. There was a peripheral person around me that was an albino. The albino's name was Yvonne, the chambermaid. I like to remember the way the light affected her: when she wanted to see something small, she had to turn her head at a certain angle, depending on where the light was coming from. Her eyes were red; she always made me think of a white rabbit. She was extremely healthy and vivacious. She seduced my brother, she was attracted to him, and then she drove him so wild by clinging on to him that he gave her a push on the stairs and she fell all the way down.

So she's another peripheral figure, even though you were so close?

LB: She got so close to our family that she became a part of it. I haven't given her a thought for twenty-five years; she's got a slew of children now.

Thomas Pynchon recounts the urban myth of the alligators in the New York sewers. Because they never see daylight, they turn into albinos.

LB: 'Why is the smell of Paris inscribed in my memory as a smell of drains?' It's true, I don't deny it, I can even explain it to you. At a difficult time in my life – it was exactly the time when the Albino appeared, she was helping us in the house at Antony – the drainage system of the Ville d'Antony underwent a radical change when the discharge into the river Bièvre was finally stopped. Our garden was seated next to the river. The Bièvre was tiny and could no longer take the contents of everyone's drains. So one day in 1934 a man came around from the sanitation department and said, 'Mademoiselle Bourgeois, we are cutting off the drains that discharge into the Bièvre, and from now on you will be connected to the main sewer.'

The cost was enormous. I was the owner of the house and thought I'd go bankrupt.

From the nineteenth century onward, these smells began to disappear from towns. The nineteenth century decided that public space should be hygienic, with no more smells. After that, sterile cities were constructed, with no odours of any kind.

LB: Thinking about this question of drains, I thought it might have come from the smell of the mud in the Bièvre. Upstream from Antony, the river ran through soil that tended to dissolve into the water. The Bièvre needed to be dredged every year. All the men from the engineer's department went down to the banks of the Bièvre with long shovels, dug out the mud, and threw it on to the bank. It's unbelievable, but it's true. I thought it might be the smell of the mud, but I was wrong, because mud has a different smell. It's just earth mixed with water. The smell reminds me of a certain period, and also of a little example of corruption. We had some neighbours who lived in a tiny house. Their names were Monsieur and Madame Legrand. Their daughter was married to a certain Monsieur Cotance, and this Madame Cotance worked for my parents, repairing tapestries. They were harness-makers. Their house was so small that the men from the sanitation department didn't notice it. It was just an oversight, and my parents never reported them to the municipality. As a result of this official oversight, Monsieur and Madame Legrand continued to discharge into the Bièvre, although it was illegal and they were neglecting their civic duties. That's why there was a very strong smell of drains in my bedroom, which adjoined the Legrand house.

When did this smell return?

LB: It came back – with something of a shock – when I returned to Cannes in 1990 after an exhibition I'd been having at the Muséed'Art Contemporain in Lyon. We revisited Le Cannet and went back to the Hôtel de la Grande-Bretagne, which made me realize that buildings and places could be peripheral too. When I was a child, the Hôtel de la Grande-

Bretagne was a three-star hotel. By the 1940s, I think, there was no further demand for it. So the Hôtel de la Grande-Bretagne that you see on the old postcards was completely demolished and replaced by a much less salubrious hostelry. It was just chance that we went there. Anyway, believe it or not, the drainage system in the bathrooms was not entirely satisfactory. The window always had to be left open. It was so extraordinary when the smell reappeared.

The same smell?

LB: The same smell pursuing me. That was when I realized that there are peripheral buildings as well as peripheral people.

Of all the elements, water fascinates me the most. Everything is always connected with water. The dangerous aspects of water are ice and flooding, and the benefit of water is life itself. All architecture depends on the flow of water; roofs, gutters, gargoyles, they are all connected with the channelling of water. Ice is very important. I'll show you drawings for a book we are about to publish called *Insomnia*. It contains more than two hundred drawings, and a lot of them are concerned with water and fear, fear of the harm that water can do, freezing, and the satiation that can cause you to die of thirst.

We have always regarded water as an infinitely available resource, but now it's becoming scarcer and scarcer.

LB: It's harmful when there is none, and when there is too much, and it's a pity to think of the role water plays. When you hear about floods in California, the people who are flooded out are never the ones who live in the mountains. The mountains belong to the rich. There's no danger. It's always the housing projects where the poor people live that get flooded.

Now that our conversation is nearly at an end, could you sum up the peripheral person for me again?

LB: I envisage the peripheral person as a person waiting her turn, or her day. For me, this is a metaphor of the female personality. She waits, and, as the

wisdom of the world has it, 'Man proposes, woman disposes.' In fact, it's the opposite. Woman proposes, man disposes. This is why peripheral people are usually females who are awaiting germination, awaiting the arrival of a masculine metaphor. All these people are women waiting to be fertilized by the historian that will discover them, as I am at present rediscovering the faint figure of Jean Gérard Matisse for the benefit of John Russell's book.

You might say that with peripheral people there is always the idea of latent potential?

LB: Potential, that's right! Maybe it will work, maybe it won't; it all depends on potential. So the woman who waits is a metaphor: 'ladies in waiting'.

You described a third peripheral figure.

LB: Raoul was another peripheral figure. Raoul Kanoui, who lived on rue du Ranelagh in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. He was the brother of one of my school friends. He was a highly important peripheral person, but he was sent away quite soon because he had tuberculosis. It was a death sentence, because tuberculosis was incurable at that time. He went to a sanitarium in Leysin, Switzerland.

You went there regularly.

LB: Just to visit him. He used to talk to me about René Crevel. He told me that, as soon as the visitors had left, the patients started up a furtive, highly intense sex life. Tuberculosis patients are very highly sexed.

Was Raoul Kanoui an artist?

LB: No, he was a writer. He knew he was going to die, that's why his last letters were so cherished by me. I still have them.

The last interview

Can you tell me what you are working on at the moment?

LB: I'm working with the writer Gary Indiana on a book, as well as working on some prints with Tracey Emin. Of course, I draw every day.

What's your motto?

LB: 'How many people do you love?'

What role does chance play?

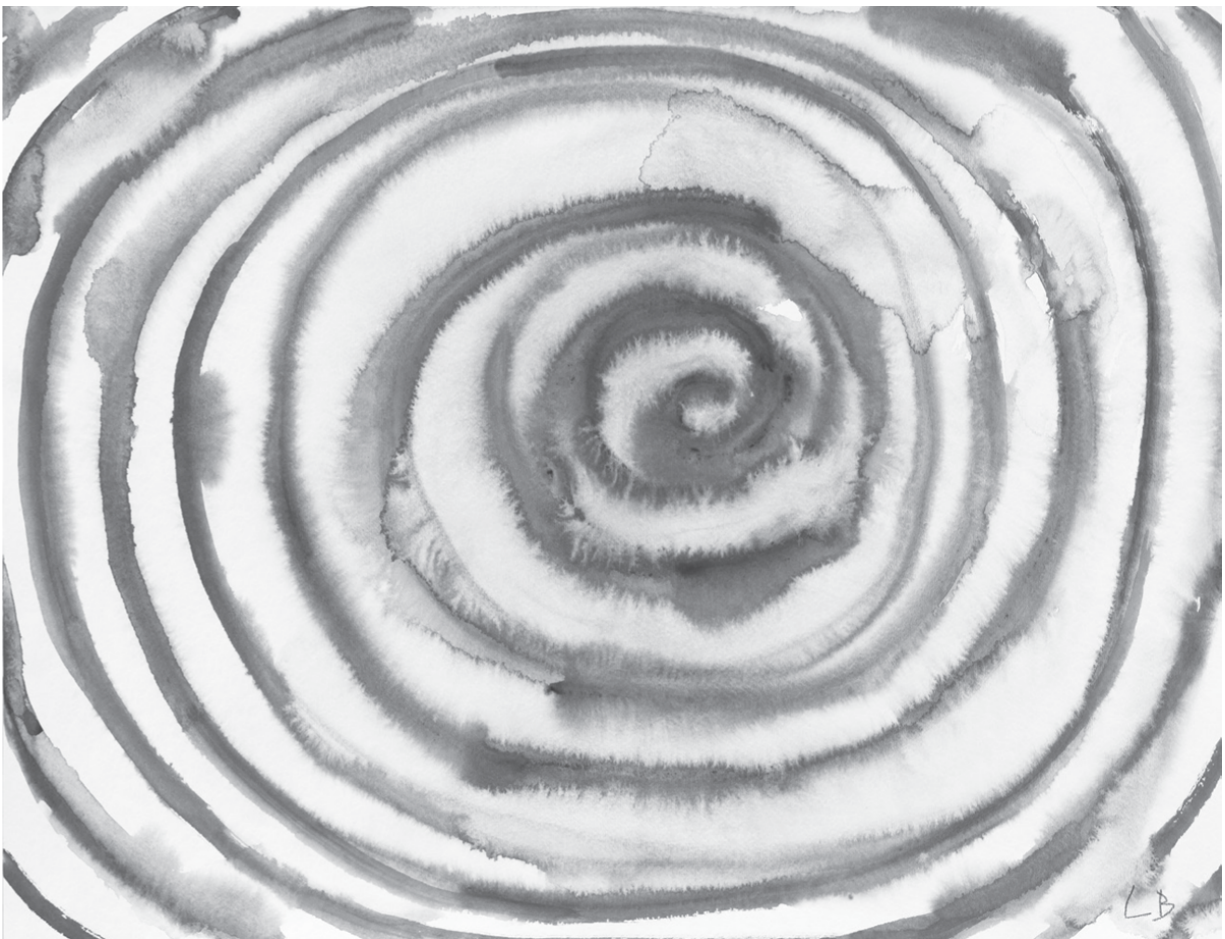
LB: I don't believe in luck. I am interested in the things that I can control.

What are your favourite museums?

LB: The Louvre, where I worked in the 1930s.

What is your new work that you created yesterday, April 6th?

LB:



Is the past always a precondition of the present?

LB: Yes.

Can you tell me about your project with Peter Zumthor [Steilneset Memorial, Vardø, Norway, 2011]?

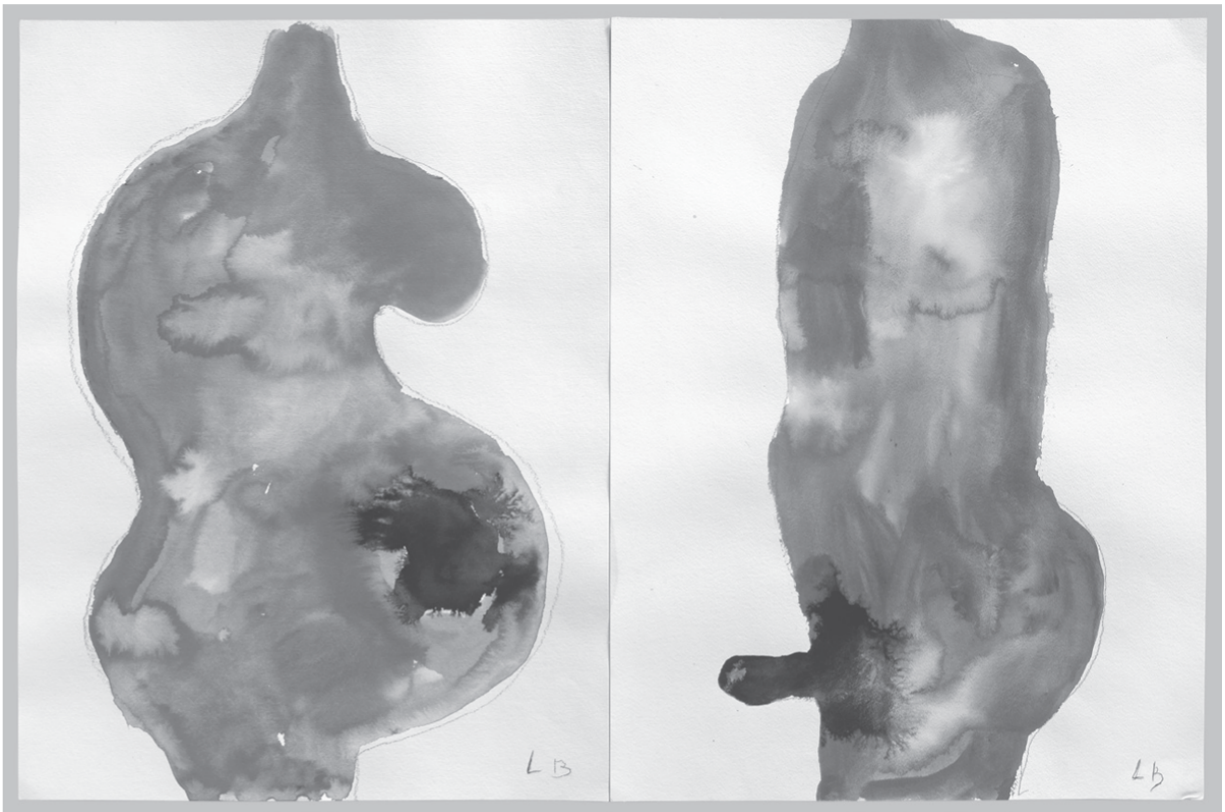
LB: My installation is a memorial to those people who were burned as witches in Norway in the seventeenth century. They happened to be mostly women. Peter Zumthor designed two buildings.

Do you have other architecture projects in mind?

LB: I am working on a hanging couple for a metro station in Vienna.

Which is your favourite drawing?

LB:



What skills does a great artist need?

LB: Little by little, he is going to make up the skill.

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

I met Marina Abramović when I did a painting show in Hamburg with Kasper König. One evening, late at night in the bar of the Hotel Admiral, I was introduced to Abramović and it was a very energizing and explosive encounter. But our contact was sporadic and we didn't know each other well until a trip we both made to Japan in 1996. We were invited as part of a big group of artists and curators to a conference about a new art centre opening in Kyushu province, the CCA Kitakyushu. There were events all over Japan, it was an unusual situation. The first interview that appears here was recorded on that trip. We were travelling in a bullet train, and in many different ways it's an interview conducted at high speed.

The imaginary museum of non-objects

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *One of the things I felt would be good to talk about is the question of collecting. Maybe we could talk not only about collecting objects but different forms of collecting. Many artists are now also collectors. Marina has not accumulated objects. Marina, you have another form of collection, a kind of imaginary museum of non-objects. Could you tell us how this imaginary museum works?*

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ: Now, first of all I have to explain why I don't collect. It is not that I am against collectors. I could not live were no one to collect my work. But I really like empty spaces, because my head is so full of things, and if I have these objects around me and on the wall, it's just too much to bear. So I prefer a minimal white space, where the light changes on the wall; that is already enough information. I am interested in works that are not possible to collect. Of course, performance is one example, unless you are collecting a documentation of photographic work or a video installation or a video documentation. There are a few examples that I would like to tell you about.

A famous one is an artist called Gino De Dominicis. He sold invisible work to a very serious collector. The collector paid for this invisible work, he bought a certificate for the invisible work: for him it was more like some kind of fun: 'Let's buy invisible work!' But he was very surprised when three weeks later he got a phone call saying the invisible work would be shipped to his home. So, exactly on time, ten in the morning, the shippers came with a big truck and six people in white gloves arrived to carry the invisible work in. They got inside and asked very seriously where to put it. So he said, 'Next to the window', and they said, 'No, no, no, there is too much light. It is very sensitive.' They placed his invisible work and left.

The same artist made another show, which he made only for dogs. He had the museum closed and only opened a small door, you know, very low, where only dogs could come in. No human being ever saw what was inside, but dogs from everywhere were just coming in and out, in and out.

Another interesting person, who died recently, is James Lee Byars, who made very beautiful, very difficult-to-collect work. For one work of his in Bern, he stood in front of the museum and he just breathed inspiration into the museum. So, this was the work: breathing. An artist breathing inspiration.

Then there is the work by Tino Sehgal, just sold recently to the Tate Gallery. There is not even a contract, there is nothing, he got the money, and the work he sold was a whisper in the ear of the curator. It was a set of instructions of what the work was going to be, whispered, and that's it. So if this guy, the curator, dies – I hope he doesn't – or let's say if he changes job, he has to whisper it to the next curator, otherwise the work will be lost for the Tate.

So it's interesting that something doesn't have less value because it's uncollectible. It's the idea that is really important. Of course, one of the most famous examples is by Yves Klein: he sold the work to the collector, the collector gave him the cheque, and he burned the cheque and scattered it from the bridge into the Seine. Nobody got anything except the memory of the act.

One of the things you also mentioned was that Charlemagne Palestine has always inspired you, particularly his uncontrollable energy. I was wondering if that sort of uncontrollable energy somehow entered your imaginary collection?

MA: You see, I always get very sentimental about what has passed, because there's a certain world, a certain individuality, certain people who really made such an impact on art. It's just about pure presence and you can't really catch it. It's invisible, but it stays in your mind for so long.

Charlemagne Palestine worked with the Sonnabend Gallery in New York at that time, and his work was mostly performances, but he would fill space

with so much energy that you stayed for a very, very long time. It's a kind of explosion of the moment, some kind of adrenalin that really affects the public. And the performance was really what all performance is about: a good performance is a dialogue of energy, whereas a bad performance has nothing there. Many people get disappointed by seeing lots of bad performances and they don't like performance at all, but in life there are very few good performances. This is actually the fact: you have to go through so much shit to see something good. It's the same everywhere else.

I was somehow wondering, that maybe Gutai could also be interesting to address. We've already spoken about Yves Klein and about his actions, but we haven't spoken much about Gutai yet.

MA: If you give the historical background on Gutai, then I will give an example.

Gutai was an avant-garde movement: the name means 'embodiment'. Extremely early, in the 50s, they transcended painting into action. They pioneered this work and it is still relatively unknown in the West. But now, many young artists are revisiting Gutai. When we met for the first time, in Japan in the early 90s, you mentioned Gutai.

MA: At the time of Yves Klein, Gutai was a group of very radical artists, who were very conceptional in their ideas. One of the shocking pieces somehow disappeared from the art books, because it was almost impossible to deal with morally. One of these artists was trying to make his ultimate painting. He put a white canvas on the floor, climbed five floors up and jumped, just jumped on the white canvas and killed himself that way. That was quite heavy, and I think that example is perhaps not an easy example to digest, because I really think that an artist's life is more useful than just for that.

James Lee Byars, who we already mentioned, once told me very enthusiastically that he had sold a minute for around fifty thousand dollars. It was his idea of selling time. The idea that

there are different types of economies, not necessarily only of objects, could maybe be an interesting thing to address.

MA: Yes, that's very interesting. As you know, the actual success of an artist is measured by how much he can sell for, especially in America. It is shocking to me. They talk about people, and they say, 'He's worth five million, and he's worth such and such.' How can you measure people like that? It's the same with art. There were so many artists who didn't sell anything during their lifetime, but when they died, their work was sold for millions. And they had hardly anything to eat. It doesn't mean anything, if you don't sell anything. It doesn't mean you're not a good artist. Just recently I was reading the [Willem] De Kooning biography. It was incredible in that time, in the 40s. He would decide in the morning whether he should buy food or a pack of cigarettes. He always chose the cigarettes. But that's his problem. I have my own experiences with money, kind of nostalgic situations. When doing performances, especially in the 70s, it was hardly a paid job. But I was a radical, I didn't want to do anything else. I didn't want to work in a restaurant or any other job, and afterwards go and be an artist. I just wanted to be an artist. So, to minimize my expenses I lived in a car, together with my partner, Ulay. A French Citroën, like a sardine can, not that kind of luxury thing, like the trailers with bathrooms and stuff, just nothing: literally just a box. We lived like that for five years ...

... '76 to '81.

MA: Yes. We didn't have to pay for electricity. We didn't have a telephone. We didn't have to pay rent. So, we were in nature and we stayed there. We would make phone calls to different places, to see if we could do performances. Then we went there. I remember one special occasion when we were sitting somewhere in Sardinia, in the middle of nowhere, waking up at four o'clock every morning and milking the sheep and helping the peasants make pecorino cheese, which I now know how to make very well. They gave us food and we were living there for a month or two. Then, with

the last drop of gasoline, we went to the Museum of Modern Art in Bologna, where there was a big performance festival. They were supposed to pay us, let's say, about three hundred dollars. Three hundred dollars was so much money. You could live on it for two months, the way we lived. But we also knew that, in Italy, if you are not paid in advance, you will never get paid. You always had a good time there and they would say they'd send the cheque. We knew this. It was actually a bigger group of artists, also Americans. There was Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, Terry Fox, Charlemagne Palestine. Our performance at that time was this piece, *Imponderabilia*, which became quite famous. The idea was, that we are the doors of the museum. We actually rebuilt the entrance of the museum in a smaller version and we were naked and were standing very close to each other. So if you wanted to enter, you couldn't pass frontally, you had to turn sideways; you had to face Ulay or me to go through that door. So we, the artists, were the door of the museum for three hours. And every day, one week before building the entrance and all the rest, we went to the office and we asked them for the money. We said, 'Can you give us the money?' 'No, today there is a strike.' The day before the key had gone. The next day, they were out for lunch, they couldn't come. It went on like this up to the last minute. It was ten minutes before the opening. The public was already there, and the performance was going to take place in desperation, because we had nothing to live on after that. So Ulay, completely naked, went to the office and said to the secretary, 'Can I get the money now?' She was shocked and screamed like hell. There was a totally naked man in front of her. Of course, the key was there, the safe was there, and she gave us the money straight away. But three hundred dollars is a lot of paper in lire, so we got this bunch of lire and we didn't know what to do with it. The performance had to start. Where could we put the money? We didn't trust anybody there. Ulay found a plastic bag in the rubbish, so he wrapped the money in the plastic bag and we went to the public toilet of the museum, and he climbed up and put the money into the water tank. We went to do the performance hoping that the money would not flush out.

Actually, we were the only ones who got paid. Everybody else never got their cheques. These were the good old days.

So, such were the good old days. But what about now? How do you see the current situation in economic terms? How do you see your work in the context of an art fair? There are works that are especially produced for art fairs now.

MA: An art fair is a very unhealthy place for an artist. It's not great to see your work being sold under these conditions. It's the market. You see, I wouldn't be in Miami without a reason, like this conversation we are having now, or the panel on feminist art the day after tomorrow. I have a function. If I didn't have a function, I wouldn't be here. But I think it is necessary. It is an infrastructure that enables the gallery owners to live, and the artist to live off his own work. I think that's really important. In my time, in the 70s, a plumber was paid better than an artist. That wasn't fair. Our work is to elevate the human spirit. In the 70s, it was shameful for an artist to even ask for money. It was shameful to even mention that you got paid for your work. I didn't even ask for a third-class ticket from Belgrade to Milan. This has really changed, which I think is important. Think about Joseph Beuys, always a good example: he had three Rolls-Royces, and he had three Rolls-Royces because he had done good work. He was paid in his lifetime and I think that's fair. I'm not ashamed of money any more like I used to be.

How do you see the future of art? In an interview in 1990 you said you believe that the twenty-first century will be a world without art. It will be a world without objects, where the human being can be on a level of such high consciousness, and at such a strong mental state, that he can transmit thoughts to other people without the need of objects in between. Now we are in the twenty-first century, already at the end of the first decade.

MA: I have to disappoint you. The process is a little slow, there are still objects around. But at the beginning of the twenty-first century a strange thing happened. There was an American sect, I don't know their name, but

they referred to themselves as a ‘computer-sect’, and they committed collective suicide, because they wanted to go on a spaceship that was hiding behind a comet passing the earth. What was interesting was that they found out that their own physical body was too heavy, and that the spirit, the soul, can travel much faster. To me, that was really the beginning of the twenty-first century. Everything becomes more and more electronic and more and more non-material in all forms of communication and the way we live our lives. The body is almost an obstacle. There are still objects and probably will always be, but I think there is a kind of purity that can be reached in this art concept I am looking for. If the artist can reach a point of illuminating a state of mind, he has to work with the public. Until now, the public has been very passive, just a voyeur of the artwork: in a museum you learn and you don’t touch the work, you are not supposed to do this and you are not supposed to do that. There are all these restrictions and you never really interact. I think this has to change. The public has to take a much more interactive position, has to become more of an experimenter and, together with the artist, has to develop the illumination of the state of mind, where objects would no longer be necessary between the artist and the public and the transmission of pure energy and a kind of well-being were the only things required. It is a very abstract concept, but I really believe in this. There are so many different cultures and ceremonies, from the Aborigines, the Tibetans, the Africans, which achieve this through repetition and ritualization. An artist can achieve that, and to me performance is the very tool with which this can be done. And of course, you have to deal with time. There have to be long-durational pieces. Here, everything is short. We have to go back into long-durational work, like in the times of La Monte Young.

The idea of long-durational pieces is going to become more and more important in your future projects. What is the future of the museum? You referred to the museum as a temple. Will the future museum be more like a temple?

MA: The more we stop believing in things, the more people come to the museums to find some kind of art spirituality. But again, the museum has not adopted very many of the artists' new ideas. There are so many interesting ideas in art that can't be executed in the museum as it is now. There are too many restrictions, especially in the American museums; they are the worst in the world. It's unbelievable: everything is forbidden there. The museums have to be adapted, and have to be constructed, so that they can really be a space of experiment, a kind of laboratory, an experimental world, and not just show a finished product that nobody can touch. What's really important for an artist is to accept failure as part of his own work in progress, because it is very easy to find the style of an artist, and if the gallery has started to sell this style, if the style is accepted and recognized by the public, he won't change any more. He is afraid to experiment, he is afraid to take other directions, because he could fail. And in doing this, he is repeating himself to death. The creative process stops when he is making the same thing over and over again. I think you have to be true to yourself, you really have to accept failure, because if you're experimenting, you can certainly fail. You never know how the experiment will turn out. It can be great, it can be really bad, but failure is so important, because it involves a learning process and it enables you to get to reach new ways of seeing your work.

This reminds me of the famous World Question Center [1968], where James Lee Byars asked many people to ask him a question, and Cedric Price's was: 'Why is it so difficult to make useful mistakes in advanced Western industrial nations?' But talking about the difficulties of and interdictions in museums, it is interesting that often out of this view on the museum, artists have founded their own institutions, artists have founded spaces and artists have even founded museums. You announced on November the 13th, your birthday, that you will be founding the Abramović Institute. From your critique of the museum, how do you imagine

*your own institution and to what extent does it revisit Alexander
Dorner's idea of the museum being a kraftwerk of some kind?*

MA: I got fed up with the attitude of complaint. Artists are great complainers. We always complain about everything and I think complaining is not useful. You have to take things into your own hands. I teach a lot. It is a very important function of the artist, a duty to society.

We are here to serve society, like oxygen: to bring new awareness. I'd really like to actually think about the public. We always forget about the public, but the public is the one that completes the work. The public is very, very important. Martha Graham, the great American choreographer and dancer, said once, 'Wherever a dancer stands is holy ground.' I'd like to rephrase this statement and I want to say this: 'Wherever the audience stands to look at a work of art is holy ground.' Without the audience the art doesn't exist. Art is made for the audience, we are made to serve the society and we are here to make a kind of bridge. That's my statement. Artists have to be servants to society, they have to deliver knowledge, be generous to the younger generation of artists and help them in their own research. That's very important. For example, [Robert] Rauschenberg had a bank, where an artist with money problems could, if he had two people who stood surety for his story, get a loan without interest. Or there are many artists who buy the work of young artists, in order to help them. Or they provide help for an artist hospital. There's a lot of work in that direction. But as I'm teaching, it was important for me to make my own institution. At first, performance didn't exist on its own as a media in school. You had installation, photography, dance – and performance. Or painting the concept of space – and performance. Performance was always added to something else. I teach in Paris, in Japan, I taught in Germany, in many different places all over the world, and everywhere the institutions are very massive, very complicated, with a lot of bureaucracy, which really stops progress. So, in order to stop complaining, I decided I should make my own institution where I can do whatever I want. This institution will be very specific: it will be my own institution for the preservation of performance art: not the performance art

we can see in America so often, like dance, theatre or stand-up comedy, but really pure performance. There will be a focus on long-duration art, from one hour to ten, fifteen hours, three days, months. There is an artist, a Taiwanese man living here in America, who was one of the best performance artists ever: Tehching Hsieh. He has done only five works in his life, but each one was one year long. Hardly anybody knows him, because he was not commercial, not sellable. But long-duration pieces are extremely important, and I want to teach a young generation of artists how this can be done, because it needs an enormous amount of control, and physical and mental preparation. Your body needs to be trained, like if you were going to the Olympics. If you want to do a performance, to push your limits in the way that is demanded by long-duration work, you have to have the willpower. The willpower is essential. I do lots of courses, like I have done in the past. For example, *Cleaning the House* [1996]. The only house we have to clean is our own body. We always clean something outside, but what about us? To clean the bodyhouse means you go into nature, you don't eat for five days, you don't talk for five days, you do very intense physical and mental action. It sharpens your perception, you experiment with your willpower, you prepare your body and mind to be able to do this kind of performance. But it is not only about the artist. I want to address the public. I want an institution open to the public that can teach the public how to see these long-duration performances. If we don't have a clue how to see these things, we quickly get bored. There will be nothing happening and you will leave. John Cage said that we have to look over the border; we have to go past being bored, to see what is really happening. We always think something has to move in front of us to arouse our interest. But without moving, motionless, controlling our own breathing and observing this, you experience something completely different. Your mind will start to work in a really different way.

*When you talk about this new space, is it somehow a laboratory?
And has it also to do with memory? A protest against forgetting?*

MA: And training the public!

You once told me, you think that only spiral spaces and pyramid spaces produce energy. How is this space going to work?

MA: [*Laughs*] This space is very tall, around thirty metres. It's an old theatre in Hudson, built in the 30s. It was turned into a cinema, then tennis courts, and afterwards it was used as a storage room for an antique shop. Now I will turn the space into a laboratory, into a performance space. You're right, triangular spaces keep the energy. There are books written on this. We should talk about this with architects. Everything triangular and everything high really works.

We all hope to meet up soon at the Abramović Institute. You are also doing some Tibetan choreographies and a big project in Laos over the next few months. Can you tell us about these projects?

MA: Laos is a very strange place, just between Cambodia, China and Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, there was a secret war taking place in Laos. The Americans bombed Laos very badly. I wanted to prepare and went to Laos last year. It took about two years to prepare this project. What happened there was incredible. I was very touched by seeing these enormous bombs, left there in the jungle, in the forest.

Some bombs have been cleaned, cut in half and made into bells for the Tibetan monasteries. The bombs became the bells that call the people to meditation five times a day. The objects of destruction turned into something so peaceful. Small bombs have also been cut in half and used to plant flowers in. In Laos, you have a strange mixture of Communist and Buddhist government and, in addition, shamanism is widespread. I have a connection to one of the best shamans in Laos, who will be guiding me to the four different spaces, where nature's spirits live. One will be the waterfall, one will be on top of the mountain, then there's the river and then the rice field. We will be filming these places with a static camera from sunrise to sunset. So the project will end up as a video installation, with five projections. In the installation there will be two projectors to the left and

two to the right. There will be something else in the middle screen. At the moment I'm building a house in Laos, just a generic, simple, wooden house. I will have an army of children – thirty children, fifteen on one side and fifteen on the other – creating a war in this house, with plastic weapons and big remote-controlled helicopters. Every tool the children use to make war will be used in this piece and they will literally burn the house and destroy it. That's in the centre of the installation, with these very peaceful landscapes on the left and right side. The project is called 'The Quiet in the Land'. It's a sad message of the future. What is happening to the earth? What's happening to these children? You know, I went there and I saw the children being constantly exposed to the most violent movies on TV and then that's what they are doing, playing war in the middle of fifteen temples, in these little villages that only have three streets. It's a mixture of two complete opposites, which I'd like to stage and make an installation out of.

From your future works to the future in general: what will be your future? How would you define future? The future will be ... ?

MA: [*Laughs*] I have one thing to say. Some years ago, in '85, I was at an incredible meeting: the Hopi Indians, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and representatives of the NASA Space Program. The talk was about the predictions of the Hopi and Tibet, and about taking uranium out of the earth. That taking uranium out of the earth changes the ozone layer around our planet was just mythology, until NASA finally got instruments to check this and it turned out to be true. You see, spiritual predictions become true. We just don't believe them until science gives us proof. So there was this meeting of these three incredibly different positions, the Hopi, the Tibetans and NASA. In that meeting the Dalai Lama said he didn't want to reincarnate, which is very interesting, because reincarnation is forbidden by the government in China. There is no reincarnation any more, because it is forbidden. I love that. They forbid everything. So it was very shocking to hear the Dalai Lama saying that he will not reincarnate. He said, because the whole planet is going through so many natural disasters, there was no

point in reincarnating. Many human lives had to be lost in order to raise the human consciousness to a level where what's happening can really be understood. Until this happens, nobody would ever transform, not just from happiness, but also from disaster. We need terminal diseases, we need earthquakes, we need tornadoes, in order to really understand how bad it is. I think in the future the function of the artist is increasingly to give awareness.

*That is a wonderful conclusion, but I have one last question.
Rainer Maria Rilke gave his advice to a young poet. What would
be your advice to a young artist in 2007?*

MA: If you want to be an artist to be famous and have money, you're heading in the wrong direction. Being famous and having money is not the aim of art, it's just a side effect that sometimes you can be lucky to achieve in your life. In many cases, the artists are not lucky and they will achieve nothing in their lifetime. But it will happen to the work later on. There are a few different ways that this happens. Sometimes it happens because you simply produce bad art. Sometimes you don't achieve it because your work is so much ahead of its time that the society you live in doesn't understand it, that it is so much in the future that society needs to develop more before it is understood. So to a young artist I would advise: relax! And just believe that good artwork has many lives.

Training the public

How would you define this rule of the game: 'Come whenever you want, but don't leave!'?

MA: ... but don't leave. Yes.

That was the only time you ever asked people to sign a document.

MA: Yes, it was. And it really worked.

When was that? And where?

MA: It was in '94 in a museum in Dallas. It was very interesting how the people stayed in line. The more restrictions, the more interested the people are. So I think we should have three categories: A, B and C. We have this 'one night' category, but we should also categorize the pieces according to difficulty and to how much time you spend with them. We should make a gradation within the works and then the visitors come to the point where they can't leave any more.

Let's think about more rules of the game.

MA: The public should go through a preparatory stage first. The people go to a certain space where they are given instructions and they have to do certain exercises to be prepared for the next step.

Like before going on a journey.

MA: Exactly. We should show these kinds of exercises. And then we use a real drill. It's like diving or parachute jumping. We will use these elements to prepare the people for surviving a long-durational piece.

So, come prepared!

MA: We have to give instructions on the clothes the visitors have to wear: comfortable, no high-heeled shoes, no jewellery: something on a level where they already feel that they are going to exercise.

A dress code as part of the drill!

MA: The base of a real-time piece is the dialogue with the public. The public completes the piece. The public is as important as the artist's work. We have to put the attention on the public, definitely. That's one important part.

It's half of the story. As Marcel Duchamp said, 'The public does half of the work.'

MA: Yes. But the artist drill and the public drill are both important. The artist drill is easier, because the public drill has not been done before. Also important is how to see the pieces. I was thinking of beach chairs, where

you can take a nap if you want, and the piece is still going on. Subconsciously you are still receiving it somehow. I can tell you a really funny story. It depressed me for some time, but now I think of it as a great moment. Harish Johari, the Indian philosopher who recently died, came to see me. I had made this piece, *City of Angels*, with Ulay, which was a very slow piece and my first work in an Asian context. It was in '83, and Harish Johari came to Amsterdam. I was very eager to show him this piece, because it was so much inspired by the East and I wanted to hear his opinion. I prepared for our meeting for two days, got all the Indian cookbooks, to cook chapati, chutney, to cook a real Indian meal for lunch. So he arrived, we had lunch, and after the Indian lunch I wanted to show the video, which is about twenty-two minutes long. He said, 'Fine, let's watch the video', sat on the couch, and at the same moment I started the video he fell into a deep sleep. He even snored. He slept a perfect, peaceful sleep. After twenty-two minutes, at the moment the film ended, he woke up and said, 'Oh, this was great. Can I have some tea?' After the tea he left and I was in a deep depression. Why did he say it was great when he hadn't seen anything? But much later, when I met him again in India, I asked him about the whole thing. He said to me, 'Just the fact that I could sleep shows that you created an incredible trust. That piece was really good.'

That's one thing I observed at our marathons. When people come to the marathon, like the 24-Hour Experiment marathon, or an interview marathon, they sometimes fall asleep and I believe that the transmission that happens is even stronger then. The important thing is that you don't disconnect with the experience.

MA: Exactly. That's why it's essential not to leave the space. And then you create a trust. If you can sleep, that means you trust. I think that the sleeping and the being there is essential.

That's another rule of the game: sleep!

MA: Yeah. Night sleep and dress code.

You also see it as a homage to Tehching Hsieh, who has only made five performances in his life. Where did you meet him for the first time?

MA: For me Tehching is my hero. Absolutely. Because, you know, in art and in art history there isn't anybody who ever made five year-long performances – five pieces, each performance one year. One year is a very long time. We're talking peanuts here with seventeen days, thinking about one year. I first heard of him when I somehow got on to his mailing list. I was still living in Belgrade and he was sending postcards with messages. So then I was there when he and Linda Montano cut the rope that had bound them to each other for a year [*Art / Life: One Year Performance 1983–1984*]. I met him, but he hardly spoke any English. Only recently, five years ago, when I came to live in New York, I found a Chinese friend who knew him. I went to Brooklyn, to his place, to talk. It was a completely empty space: just a table, two glasses of water and the two of us. He is a real master. He is so important to me, because such pieces are so radical, so incredibly insane. One of the strongest pieces he has ever done is punching the clock every hour for one year [*One Year Performance 1980–1981*]. That means, you can't go away from the clock for one year, you can't sleep longer than fifty-five minutes, you can't eat, you can't even shop.

He made this work. What is incredibly important to me about his work is not that he made one work each year, but that actually, after this five-year experience, he stopped doing work. He said, 'Now I'm doing life.' That's what is incredible: the work is an example of how the work can transform you. That's it. The work, the performance is a tool, nothing else, but a tool to transform the way of thinking, the way of seeing things and to elevate your spirit and this is what happened and this is why this work is so believable. This is why I have such a big problem with the entire American minimalism and, let's say, Roman Opalka. He bought enough canvas for the rest of his life, enough paint for the rest of his life and he said that if he used it all he would stop. He has two measures of canvas, one is a travelling size so it can go under his arm and one the size that it can go through his studio.

Every morning, when he wakes up, he takes a photo of himself and – the canvases are all grey and he only uses white paint – writes the number of the day [1965/1–∞]. He's been doing this for probably over forty years now and the numbers he is doing are going into billions, you can't even finish one number on one canvas. There is really an enormous amount of time in it and it's a very meditative piece. I understand all that. What I don't understand is if you're doing this for such a long time, how this work doesn't transform you, how you don't go somewhere else. That's the thing for me. Because then we come to the point of the market. That this kind of work is recognized and there are certain galleries showing it and there are collectors who are buying it. It's actually a whole complex that doesn't enable the artist to experiment and go somewhere else and be somewhere else. This is why failure is so important. This is why, if the transformative force of art puts you somewhere else and, like Tehching, you just say, 'Now I do life', that is for me believable. That's why he's my hero.

Did he never fail?

MA: No. In an interview with Adrian Heathfield he said he didn't need the public to do his pieces, he didn't care about the public. This is a complete contradiction, because subconsciously he cared incredibly much about the public. In documenting every hour so precisely, he had total proof to everybody else that he never faked anything. It's absolutely honest and real. He went through five experiences like that: firstly, one year without making art and without looking at art [*One Year Performance 1985–1986*]; then, after thirteen years of making art, but without showing it, now he is just living. To me, it's completely logical, that after these radical pieces there is a transformation, physical and almost chemical, that you don't need more. I'm questioning something else. The point where I don't trust Opalka, and where I trust Tehching, is, if you do this so radically, and you go through the process of change – because spiritual change is always happening – then you have to accept this change and move on to somewhere else. Opalka may be accepted in the art milieu and the market, but what has happened to him is routine. It's like the guys in the factory stamping eggs. The

transformation didn't take place. That's why I don't trust it. That thing became some sort of aesthetical drop. It doesn't radiate. That Tehching stopped working after his experiences is believable. A change took place. Another person who is incredibly radical is Stanley Brown, but he doesn't travel. He won't ever take a plane. He once took a boat from Indonesia. He is the most minimal, the most radical. I don't know how he is right now. You know what Stanley Brown could be good for? The drill. He is perfect in giving instructions. What about Paul McCarthy? I really like him.

And Gustav Metzger!

MA: Gustav Metzger is fantastic. Mike Kelley!

Yoko [Ono]!

MA: I saw her new piece, the *Cut Piece* redone. There is something of her being out of touch. You can feel it in the piece. It is overly protected. It's like nothing is happening in life that involves any kind of risk. It's like what she has done in her early work.

But when I curated her show in Paris [‘Women’s Room’, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2003] Yoko redid this piece and she didn’t want a list of the guests invited. It was announced in a newspaper.

MA: Oh, really?

Anybody could come.

MA: And she didn't have bodyguards?

She was alone on stage. It was a very powerful experience!

MA: Do you know the Italian artist Nico Vascellari? I gave him the first prize at the Trento festival some years ago. He was working with noise and sounds. Did you see the piece in Venice? The Italians like him very much.

Nikhil Chopra has these endurance pieces. But he has also been drawing for years and years. What about a writer’s diary: Ingo

Niermann writing a book about the drill?

MA: But he mustn't leave the space, and he must write a diary. And we need a megaphone, an old, poor one. A pre-recorded voice is giving instructions through the megaphone. Very anonymous, but very military.

Maybe at the entrance.

MA: The atmosphere of a drill is created from the beginning.

And the rules of the game are given outside.

MA: Yeah! We'll have a real camp! You know, I come from a military family so I'm fascinated by uniforms. Uniforms are essential for this project, because it's one thing if the people come with their own comfortable clothes, but it's another when they get simple clothes. All the clothes have to be the same colour, very simple, maybe trousers and an overcoat. I love Rodchenko's clothes: they are the epitome of artist clothes for me.

Maybe you could design them.

MA: I would love to do that. Oh, uniform design! That's something! Rat grey, I love rat grey.

All the visitors will wear them and all the performers will too?

MA: The artists will be different, because some artists have their special clothing for their performances. It's the public in a public drill. You know where this will bring us? You get the public to experiment, you get unification: everybody is the same. No difference. Wearing a uniform is similar to wearing a mask on your face. You can relax better, be more self-conscious than in your personal clothes. The uniform is essential for the drill. There are three institutions that I just adore: sanatorium, prison and monastery. All these three institutions have regularities on the body. In a uniform, the body behaves and your mind is free. In these institutions your body is taken care of. Food is regular. You don't have to be concerned with your body. It's so necessary. It's absolutely necessary.

So, what do we have? The megaphone, the uniform ... [*Laughs*] We have the drill. [*Waves her arms*] We have the drill, baby! Finally.

Artist pollution

We are looking at Martin Rees's quote, and he asks, 'Will civilization survive in the next century?' And we also have a text by Peter Ward from the New Scientist, which has to do with extinction and which actually goes from a sort of Gaia paradigm to a Medea paradigm. Could we go a bit more into depth with this topic of extinction?

MA: I just want to add my own experience of extinction. I really wanted to tell you that this article is quite incredible. It's about the idea that actually the animals and the plants are going to extinct themselves, as we are too. I'll tell you a story from about eight years ago. I went to the Cocoa Island in the Maldives. This is a tiny little island in the Maldives archipelago and there are just eight huts. I stayed there for a month. I looked around. I was so impressed that there was not one little shell left on the island because the tourists just come and take the shells. There are little naked crabs, you know the crabs that always go into empty shells, which become their houses [hermit crabs]. So they're just running around, but instead of shells they were carrying the tops of washing products like Nivea and all this on their backs as their shelter. So it was red, green, yellow, all plastic, an incredible scene, almost like science fiction. I was so impressed by this, it was so sad, that I actually took a two-hour trip to a bigger island and went to the market and bought two bags of shells. I went back to the Cocoa Island and I distributed the shells everywhere on the beach. I was there for three weeks and not one crab went into the empty shells. They liked plastic better. [*Laughter*] That's the beginning of extinction.

Now the texts here address the future in rather dark terms. It talks about Medean extinction throughout evolutionary history and it's really a strong contradiction to the current, media-hyped theories

of James Lovelock and Gaia, which describe the world as an organism, so to say. To quote Ward from this text, when asked 'What of the future?' he writes, 'Here too we can refute Gaia and this is perhaps the most interesting and shocking of discoveries: life seems to be actively pursuing its own demise, moving earth towards the inevitable day when it returns to its original state: sterile.' Marina, that leads us to your remark the other day when we were discussing this idea of the end of time. It was the 21st of December and you quoted that Maya thing.

MA: [Laughs] Oh yeah, we discussed this a few weeks ago. So the story – well, it's a fact – that the Maya calendar, which was one of the most precise calendars concerning the planets and the measuring of time and so on that has ever been invented, stops on the 21st of December 2012, which is not that far away. What happens on that day, every twenty thousand years, is that the entire galactic system, all the planets, are in one line with earth. It's not the end of the world, but we will be exposed to the entire influence of the sun, plus all the planets, all at once. This will really change us, that's what they say, and the Maya calendar stops there. The idea is that invisible, parallel worlds would open to us – many scientists are talking about this – they will open and we're going to be sensitive to things and seeing things, paranormal activities that we've never had before, because something will happen with this enormous influence. If you just think that we are seventy per cent water and the full moon affects us so much, it affects the world, even the ocean comes up and down and it affects our body. So can you imagine all the planets at once? Maybe we should do some big event on that day? [Laughter]

And finally, Marina, do you want to comment on that topic of waste?

MA: No, I'm only interested in artist pollution. I think that artists today make enormous pollution in the world. I think that every artist should really go to his studio and see what's happening there. You know there is this big

Sufi statement, which was taken up by advertising: 'Less is more.' My version of this is, let's have more and more of less and less. I'm always thinking how little we need to actually make art work, how little we can use. I mean, especially here in this performance event, the materials that we use are hardly anything. We're talking about two stones, three Sony recorders, we're talking about lots of white paper – we're talking about very, very few things. Why do artists, especially our generation, think they need these enormously expensive materials in order to make a work of art? I don't think so. I think we should really look into ourselves first. I can't look into the whole world, I have to start from me. What is my waste? I think that art pollution is something very, very evident. I'd like to finish with this, with a little list, which I always have in my head to remind me. It's the guide to Buddhism, for the Tibetan Buddhists: how many possessions do you need in your life? Do you know how many possessions you need in your entire life? There are nine items. I'm going to tell you which they are. The first item is the summer robe, the second is the winter robe, the third is a pair of shoes, the fourth is the bowl for food, the fifth is an umbrella, to shelter from the sun and the rain, a mosquito net, to be protected from the animals, the scripture that you have to read, then a mat to sleep, and the ninth possession is a pair of glasses, if you need them.

Marina Abramović presents

What's your view on Michael Jackson? Jeff Koons said the other day that he thinks the world lost a great artist with Michael Jackson.

MA: Oh no, no. I think very differently.

Actually, we had this long talk about Michael Jackson with Antony and the Johnsons. Antony thinks what he did to his life was a disgrace: he could have used it in a much better, more productive way with his position as an artist and a musician. Also, this is not fair for his children, who are anyway not his, but this is beside the point. What I'm thinking is, it's just a waste of time to be so depressed and abused. That's what I hate. I hate to destroy life

in that way. I think, at the same time, this was his only way out, to be a martyr, because he could not manage these fifty concerts. He was actually obliged to die because there was no other way.

In this sense it was like a dead end.

MA: It was a very dead end! You see, this was actually a good end, because an artist has to know how he lives, when he should stop working and how he dies. My major wish to die is to die not angry, not unsatisfied: to die consciously. Consciously and with a huge satisfaction that I've done what I am supposed to do.

You said today at the Whitworth Gallery that you've already started to work on this very long-term project, which is your death.

MA: There's a third act, as Leonard Cohen suggested in yesterday's *Guardian*. He said that the third act always starts good, but finishes somehow tragic! [Laughs] I thought that was such a good thing. Tragic because the main actor in the third act actually dies and there's no way out. That's a really interesting thing. I think this 'no way out' is positive in a way. We actually have to go forward. Many years ago I witnessed the funeral of a young curator from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. You know, the Dutch are Protestant and it was one of the most amazing funerals I ever saw in my life, because you're not supposed to cry. You're not supposed to be sad because it's just life continuing after death, a new beginning. The Sufis say that life is a dream and death is waking up. This thing was amazing. A young curator who left two children: one six years old, one four years old. They were sitting in the first row and the coffin was open and they told them that their mother was an angel and she was just sleeping and she's going to go to the angels. The children were very happy and nobody cried. The grandmother came and gave this incredible speech about how her daughter had done so well and had died so well. Then they played some music and the priest came and did the most unbelievable thing. He came with two huge screws and gave them to the children to screw up

the coffin. So the children think that their mother is going to paradise, a very good angel, everyone is happy, music playing: everything was wonderful. Then we start going out into this rainy horrible day of Dutch grey sky, into the alley where the coffin is going to be put into the earth. The scream of the children when they realized their mother is going into the earth and not going to the sky was unbearable. Honestly, it was unbearable. Then you go back to have a little drink, and the Dutch are so stingy about any kind of food, so it was just coffee. I was there with Juan Muñoz and he said, ‘What the fuck, they give me coffee! Give me a double Scotch whisky, vodka or anything’, because it was so unbearable. I have made this thing about my funeral. I want to have three funerals, with two fake bodies and one real body so I can be buried simultaneously in the three cities where I lived the longest in my life: Belgrade, New York and Amsterdam.

The three cities of your life, basically.

MA: Yes. The funerals have to be simultaneous, there are no black clothes, everybody has to wear vivid colours. Green, bright green, yellow, red, orange: just happy colours. I also need to compose the song, the Frank Sinatra song ‘My Way’, but in my arrangement. This will be sung and it will be a celebration of dying. I want a very happy celebration, lots of jokes, lots of fun.

Where will your real body be buried?

MA: You don’t know. Nobody will know where the real body is, because I will have the coffins closed by three people who will not tell. I hope it will not happen like with Kafka. Kafka gave all his manuscripts to his best friend and he didn’t destroy them!

They were resurrected.

MA: ... and published everywhere, so I hope they aren’t going to open the coffins and discover my real body and mess up all my ideas. But we don’t know!

It's also interesting that Antony [Hegarty] would do the soundtrack. He is a visionary.

MA: I'm so crazy about him. I even asked his mother if she could sign an adoption paper so I can adopt him, but she refused!

What are you going to do with him?

MA: Everything. I love Antony! I wanted to propose to him to sing my instructions for the performances with Bob Wilson, *Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, for the next Manchester Festival – which is not supposed to be said before September!

Absolutely! So we're having a secret here in our interview! What is also interesting is you're here a week after the inauguration of our project, of 'Marina Abramović Presents ...' and things seem to be well at the Whitworth.

MA: It's unbelievable: the more they perform, the better energy they get. The more you do things, the more they want to do. It's a mathematical thing: the more energy you put in the more you get back. There's no way out of this in everything you do: it's the cosmic order. It's kind of incredible, but we still have seven days to go!

What was the revelation which triggered this idea of 'Marina Abramović Presents ...'?

MA: You mean doing this project? I think in my case you'll have to be disappointed. I don't think it's a revelation. It's forty years of performance work, developing and coming to this conclusion. That actually, for me, the only transformative force in performance is the long duration of the work and this really comes from experience and doing it for a long period of time.

When we spoke the other day you said that it came from even further back in the past.

MA: Actually the first idea ever to do something more durational came in '79 when I spent an entire year living with Australian Aborigines and Ulay my partner in the desert, at the west of Lake Disappointment. Why was it called Lake Disappointment? Because there was never any water, or the water comes only every seven years. So we went there to stay with the Aborigines for several reasons. For us this was a real nomadic culture, it was completely based on performance, as a way of life. It's a culture that doesn't have any possessions: they live in the present time, here and now. All the stories to do with time are done in this moment: songlines. There are all these incredible things. Like they only count to four in their language, after that is 'many'. They don't use five or ten, like the fingers, like other cultures do. They don't have 'yes' and 'no' in their language because they never doubt, because they're always clear about what's going on. It really was fascinating. But being there is basically confronting yourself with an enormous amount of heat. So you can't walk, you just have to sit for long periods of time during the day. You can only make the food before sunrise and after sunset and most of the time there's not even shadow. You just have a piece of canvas you stretch around the trees because there are no leaves. So you sit there. In this kind of sitting position that you are forced, physically, to understand what time means and what a long duration means or what happens to your mind if you don't move. This was the beginning, actually, of the idea of long-durational work, which we executed later on.

That's really the beginning of pieces like Nightsea Crossing [1981–7] and others, but when we spoke you also mentioned that there was another kind of trigger that goes further back in your work, to your very early instruction pieces, which kind of relates here to 'the drill'. That is very much related, I think, to your early instruction pieces.

MA: But you know, you always have to look to the childhood somehow. It's my idea, my general idea: the more shitty a childhood you've had, the better the artist you become, [laughter] because you've got more material to work with. I really had not a great childhood, so there was lots of material. But

basically, instructions came from my mother and my father and both of them were big national heroes and partisans, so everything was all destruction and discipline. Everything was like 'learn ten sentences of French, do this, do that' all day long. Even during the night, if my bed was not perfect she would wake me in the middle of the night because I was sleeping too messily! It was just incredible discipline and control, and then, after, I rebelled against all these instructions and hated them completely. But then, in my own life, with my own work, I started building these instructions for myself and every work is actually based on certain instructions and a certain discipline that in this specific time and this specific place, in front of the public, have to be executed. So instructions become really important, it becomes some kind of frame, which I can make my work with.

What happened, then, in 1975, within this kind of instruction frame and early 'drill', is that you went to Amsterdam. The idea was obviously that Amsterdam stood somehow for freedom, but the very first project you did there was forbidden.

MA: It was a complete contradiction. I went to Amsterdam to be part of a project for the television called *Body Art*. It was just the beginning: I was the only one from East Europe. I had made this piece in Belgrade where I just cut a five-point star, the Communist star, into my stomach with a razor blade, with two points pointing up, which related to the kind of evil idea of the pentagram. Because of that, the entire programme was forbidden, because everyone thought it was the Jewish star. It was just the Communist star. Never mind. I came to the country where everything's fine, where even prostitutes have a pension and drugs are for free and nothing's restricted. And then the first thing that I do there is forbidden. It was quite incredible, but at the same time, because of the publicity of that, I started getting grants so that I could do my own work and I stayed in Amsterdam. But it was hell for me, it was too free, nothing mattered any more, the old instructions didn't work in Amsterdam. I had to really rethink and build some more restrictions in order to be able to work. It was just the kind of freedom that I

was not comfortable with. This is a very big problem for so many East European artists, because their work is based on restrictions and how to overcome them and how to rebel against them and then you go to these other countries and the work doesn't function any more. That's really a problem.

It's interesting, because there are rules of the game and, for example, this is an exhibition of durational works from artists whose home base is the art world, which actually happens in an empty museum. Then it's interesting, for some other projects, that are not in that definition, you do work with Riccardo Tisci, you do work with Antony, so that's a different story.

MA: Yes, there's a collaboration where you can make excursions to other fields and come back to your own field. The context in which you are doing things is very important. If somebody makes bread in a bakery, they're a baker. But if somebody makes bread in the gallery, they're an artist.

Is that a detour? When I went to see David Hockney the other day, he said he needs to make detours to come back to painting. So he makes things on the iPhone and that leads him back to painting. He makes a film and that leads him back to painting. He writes an art-history text ... is it a detour for you?

MA: I think so and it's really a very inspiring detour. You have to make detours. The early works of Rebecca Horn – I was always talking to her. She made movies that nobody liked, because Hollywood said they were too artistic, the artists said they were too Hollywood, so it was in between. But from that movie she generated ideas that became the objects and her work. So excursions are really important. It's important that you try different things and it's very important to fail in this trying, because failure is the big learning field. Actually: the more failing, the better it gets.

I have one last question. I wanted to ask you, nine days into the project, what is your feeling? Are there any surprises, any things you wouldn't have expected or does it all go according to plan?

MA: No, it's amazing. I think that this process brings so many new thoughts. Thoughts about how we can see new collections, how the question of museums should be addressed now, about the role of the public. You see, it's really an absolute experiment. It's never been done and we don't know how it all works. We only know that some of the performances are seen as a loop and some are progressive. In some there is a process and a concept and in some there is not, just loops of repetition for hours and hours. You come to a really special state of mind doing that. If you think of the performance of Nico Vascellari downstairs with the storm, it's the kind of piece we can almost compare with some kind of shamanistic activity, in which you have the same sound again and again, creating these vibrations so the entire building is vibrating and anybody who has stayed in this space for long enough can feel the kind of energy that is happening. So I really worry about this piece, myself, because how is it going to affect him in the process of one day, two days, five days, ten days? We're talking about seventeen days for four hours, which, you can see, he is doing absolutely without stopping. Every day I go there and I'm the first to ask the audience to leave and then I stop him. There is another thing that is very important. If you don't see the beginning and end, you just see things happening, so the performance continues in the mind. So when everybody is out I go to him, just to see how he is doing and he is in an incredible high state of mind, getting better and better, but it's really a question you can't answer until the last day. This is a real experience for the institution, for the curator, for the artist, which we have to go through. I never worried about myself so much; it's horrible to be a curator, God. *[Laughter]* I'm totally exhausted: it's easy to worry about yourself, but it's not easy to worry about fourteen people.

But the main thing is the artists' experience, because each time they are getting better and better and they are getting these kinds of experiences, which are almost at a high spiritual level. For the first five days Amanda [Coogan] was not concentrated, she could not really get this jump in a way that was believable. Now she's seeing auras, she's seeing blue lights everywhere, she's like this shooting energy. All these people are coming to a certain state of consciousness that can only be reached through the

process of time. That's really something that they didn't expect. I knew it, but they didn't know, because they never went through the experience. So now we have to have a completely new discussion.

MONIR SHAHROUDY
FARMANFARMAIAN

I've been interested in Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian since I saw her work in Dubai in 2007. I wanted to find out about artists and institutions in Iran, and so asked the artists I met there who their influences, heroes and inspirations were. One name came up consistently: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian.

I became very curious about her and so read her memoir, A Mirror Garden, to find out more. She has been through a series of exiles, moving from Iran to the United States in the 1940s, returning to Iran after a decade, leaving again during the Revolution, before returning again in 2003. Farmanfarmaian and I have a ritual now of meeting in hotels for breakfast. We sit there with lots of her drawings and notebooks and look at images over food. When we met she hadn't yet published a monograph of her work, and we recorded these conversations on the way to that book, which I am now editing with Karen Marta.

Memory boxes

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *Tell us a little bit about how it all started.*

How did you become an artist?

MONIR SHAHROUDY FARMANFARMAIAN: I was born in Qazvin, and our house was full of paintings and nightingales and birds. In the Safavid period, they decorated the houses in Islamic design, with beautiful paintings on the wood and plaster work on the wall. In the room that I was supposed to have a nap in every afternoon, the whole ceiling was painted wood: nightingales, flowers and a border with a centerpiece for a chandelier, and all the windows were stained glass. So rather than sleep, I used to count the birds and the flowers. Then at the age of seven we moved to Tehran; my father had a government position in the Parliament. We rented a house full of plaster and portraits of all the old kings and great poets. They made us have a nap every day, but again I never slept as I was always looking at the ceiling.

When I finished school, I went to the Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University for six months, and then decided that I had to study art outside Tehran. It was during the war, and I wanted to go to Paris, but the ambassadors and whatnot wouldn't let me. In 1944, I decided to go to America instead. I had a friend who was working with the archaeologist Donald Wilber doing architecture research in Iran, and he managed to get me a visa. I was on the road for three months, from Tehran to Los Angeles and at last to New York. When I finally arrived in Manhattan, I was very disappointed. I said, 'Whatever I have seen in the movies, this is not it!' – but I had high expectations. First they sent me to high school to learn English, which I never did unfortunately. [*Laughs*] Then I went to Cornell University for a little. In the end I came to New York City and went to

Parsons. I learned fashion design and restoration. Then I started to work. I lived in New York for twelve years.

Frank Stella, who has been a friend of yours since 1974, has observed that you came at the right time to the right place. That was an incredible moment in New York, with Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Joan Mitchell and Frederick Kiesler, all those extraordinary people working in the same place at the same time.

MSF: I had friends who were also studying art, including the writer, artist and educator Abe Chanin, and they invited us to lectures at the Eighth Street Club and gatherings at the Cedar Tavern, where all the avant-garde artists came together. I didn't drink at that time, but I went anyway and met Pollock, de Kooning, Philip Johnson, [Mark] Rothko and [Barnett] Newman and many other artists.

When I met Louise Nevelson, she became a very good friend of mine. She wouldn't come to the club but we used to see each other very often at the Art Students League, where we were both taking classes. We used to see each other casually at small social gatherings. Later, after the [1979] Revolution, when I saw her again in New York we would go to dinner, but she didn't go out as much to big events. She would have dinner only with Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage. I knew Cage quite well also. I had this black hair and I was not bad looking [*laughs*] so everybody invited me to their parties. Becky and Bernard Reis had a big art collection and used to have these massive parties. I met [Alexander] Calder there, I met Larry Rivers there, I met [Marcel] Duchamp there – he was playing chess.

You saw Duchamp play chess?

MSF: Yes, I did. Everybody wanted to invite this unusual girl from the Far East who had come to New York to study art. That was my connection to most of them.

You met Frank Stella at that time?

MSF: No, I met him later. I first met Frank in Tehran in early 1974 at a party at the American embassy in Tehran when he came to see the historical places in Iran, but I ignored him completely; I didn't know who he was! When I travelled to New York later that year while researching bringing great Western art to Tehran for our students to learn from, I was told I had to go see Frank Stella. So I sought him out, and we became good friends.

And you met Andy Warhol through your work in graphic design.

MSF: Yes. I was doing freelance fashion drawings, and I drew some flowers, we call them Iranian violets, and sold them for a hundred and fifty dollars to an agency. Later it became the design for the Bonwit Teller department store. It was all over the shopping bags, the negligees, the shoes; that violet of mine was everywhere. Then I got a full-time job at Bonwit Teller doing layouts, and Andy was one of the artists that I used to make layouts for. He was very good at drawing shoes. I would design a big *New York Times* page with a layout of eight or ten shoes and then give it to him to draw them. We used to see each other on the weekend, you know, at dinner parties or picnics with the other staff – that was how I got to know Andy. Later, in the late 70s when I saw him again, I teased him about how important he had become with the soup cans and so on. I asked him, 'Do you remember, you used to draw shoes for twenty-five dollars each, for Bonwit Teller?' And he said, 'Monir, it was so much money at that time!' which is true. Anyway, after the Revolution, I used to see Andy quite a lot.

Another important artist friend you met regularly was Milton Avery. You were making flower drawings drawn from life in the garden, and you told me that it was Avery who introduced you to monotypes and that was a very important moment in your working life.

MSF: I used to spend the summer at an artist colony near Woodstock; a friend and I rented a cottage in the hills. The owner of the cottage was Peter Whitehead, and his father had been a utopian; he bought many hills in Woodstock and built cottages for the artists to rent. The Averys had the

closest cottage to mine, about a ten-minute walk away, and we used to see each other very often. I became friends with his wife, Sally, and his daughter, March, who were artists too. Milton used to come to my cottage every day to do drawings. I had a baby at that time, my first daughter. He would always say, 'Never mind me, Monir, you do whatever you want. I'll just sit here and watch.' And he did. He would follow me around and do sketches. Later he taught me how to do monotypes, to paint on a piece of linoleum and then put the canvas on it and press the painting on to it. My first exhibition, in Tehran in 1963, was monotype flowers made with Milton Avery's technique.

What prompted you to return to Iran in 1957? You were part of the New York art scene, yet you decided to go back?

MSF: A wonderful gentleman by the name of Abolbasha Farmanfarmanian asked me to marry him. He was an international lawyer who had studied at the University of Chicago. He was the only one who ever believed that I was really an artist. My family, my friends, and my artist friends never told me I had any talent; I still don't believe that I do, but they certainly didn't believe it.

You had been doing drawings every day since the 1930s, but when you went back to Tehran you set up a proper studio for the first time.

MSF: Yes, I always did a lot of drawing, all throughout my student years and then at Woodstock. I used to be very good at pen-and-ink drawing. When I got to Tehran I was doing the monotypes; I had a garden and I had a little girl, and I stayed home and took care of her. I would pick a flower and take it into a small room in my house to paint it. At one point I went to Paris on vacation, and while I was gone my husband built me a studio. When I got back he told me, 'You don't have to do bedroom paintings any more.' So that's really when I started to paint.

You had brought back with you everything you experienced in the 1950s on the New York art scene, and you were making these

paintings and monotypes, but you also embarked on very intense local research all over Iran.

MSF: When I got to Tehran I was working very hard in the studio, and I was also keeping up a busy social life, gardening a lot, running the household, and taking care of my daughters. So now and then I would say to my husband, 'I'm heading out to the desert.' We had a Volvo, and I would take the sleeping bag and some food boxes and travel all over Iran. I went to old cities and ruins. I discovered the tribal peoples, the Qashqai, the Turkomans, the Lurs, the Yamuts and the Kurds – they were wonderful people. I used to sleep in their tents or in the café by the side of the road; there were not many hotels at that time. I travelled a great deal. I saw the Sassanian palaces and the ruins in Persepolis, all the mosques in Isfahan and in the small towns. I became passionately interested in the architecture. I read books and talked to people, and I met the workers on the sites. I loved it. My inspiration has always been the public art, from the tribes. I suppose I try and transfer it to my own heart.

In your travels in Iran you were accumulating thousands of objects, tents, coffee-house paintings, one by one, sometimes in quite adventurous circumstances.

MSF: Yes, I amassed quite a collection. I found my first coffee-house, or *qahveh-khaneh*, painting when I was travelling in the northern part of Iran in 1958. I spotted it through a second-floor balcony, a beautiful painting, very primitive, of a man sitting on a horse with lots of beautiful landscape. In those days coffee-houses were only for men, but it was ten in the morning and there were no men inside, so I went up and asked if I could buy it, but the man said no. I asked, 'Why not?' He said, 'Because my customers like it.' I said, 'Where can I get another painting like this?' He said, 'The other coffee-house; they might sell theirs.' So I went to that coffee-house to inquire. The paintings used to be part of a performance of storytelling at these coffee-houses, but then radio came along, and people would sit and listen to that; they weren't sitting around talking about

paintings. I went to different cities and collected coffee-house paintings. I ended up with about a hundred pieces, and they're very large; it was a very surrealistic time. I said Salvador Dalí should come and learn how they make all the different subjects, so many beautiful scenes.

I also collected jewellery from the Turkomans, a tribe in the north-west of Iran, in Afghanistan and in Russia. They are descendants from Genghis Khan, and they have beautiful handicraft in jewellery and rugs and textiles. I went to an antique shop and saw a big sack of silver on the counter. I asked the man what it was, and he said, 'This is Turkoman jewellery. They don't use it any more, so we buy it and melt the silver.' I was very upset and said, 'My God, they're beautiful, I have to save that and collect it.' So I started a Turkoman collection, and it became very large. The Metropolitan Museum asked me if they could show it. I had a thousand kilos of silver and gold.

It's almost as if you had your own museum.

MSF: Someone needed to save these pieces of our culture before they were lost. Once I discovered a painting in an antique shop, a very cheap painting behind glass, from the south of Iran. It was so beautiful, like a Matisse. I travelled to the middle of nowhere to meet the artist. He lived in a tent, and he was blind. I ended up with hundreds of paintings. All of that is gone now; everything was confiscated when the Revolution happened.

You told me about one moment in your travels that was almost like an epiphany: a journey you made with Robert Morris and Marcia Hafif to see a certain shrine. A major invention followed.

MSF: In my travels all over Iran, I saw a lot of old palaces and shrines with mirror work on the ceiling and on walls, and paintings behind glass on the plaster architecture. In Shiraz and Isfahan it was really magnificent. In 1966 I went with Robert and Marcia to the fourteenth-century shrine of Shah Cheragh, the 'King of Light'. It has high ceilings, domes and mirror mosaics with fantastic reflections. We sat there for half an hour, and it was like a living theatre: people came in all their different outfits and wailed and

begged to the shrine, and all the crying was reflected all over the ceiling and everywhere, and I cried too because of all the beautiful reflections. I said to myself, I must do something like that, something that people can hang in their homes. And from then on I went to see all the mirror work in the different shrines.

So that was the beginning of your work with mirrors and glass?

MSF: Well, I had already been making paintings behind glass, mostly abstract paintings, but also flowers, roses, and some portraits. I had started with linoleum prints, but then I decided that linoleum was dirty, so I started using glass for the monotypes: one day I picked up one of the glass plates that I had used, and I saw that the leftover of the painting looked nice on the glass. So I decided to do paintings behind glass. I also was inspired in this by my collections of paintings from the Qajar period – mostly they were flowers and birds. But after I had seen all those mirror mosaics, I wanted to make glass paintings with mosaic work and geometric designs like in the shrines. My husband was very cooperative, and he suggested that we make a framework of cast iron and wire mesh and put plaster over it to work the glass designs into. I made four or five artworks that way, and they were very heavy. I ended up getting some materials from a plastic factory that belonged to part of my family, and I worked with the master craftsman Haji Ostad Mohammad Navid and a carpenter to invent lighter frames out of wood and plastic.

These mirror works in the shrines use a lot of fragments: they are broken mirrors. You told me about the long tradition of broken mirrors in Iran.

MSF: During the Safavid period, a few hundred years ago, the Iranian kings wanted large mirrors to be installed during the construction of their rooms; they would have twenty or thirty wives who had to stay inside the palace. The mirrors were for the women to see themselves, to see how beautiful they were, and also to feel free, not trapped inside the palace. But the mirrors would get broken along the Silk Road, and rather than waste them,

the craftsman architects used the shards as they used tile and plaster in the geometric design. They used very small pieces, sometimes half an inch by half an inch, triangular, square, hexagonal, all different shapes. They put them all together, and it makes a beautiful reflection.

This is the tradition you brought into your own work.

MSF: When I discovered the mirror mosaics, I realized that nothing is done spontaneously; it is all a calculation of geometry and design. The circle is the universe; its number is twelve, and that's the months of the year, and the zodiac. The numerical symbolism goes very deep: from creator (1) all the way up to the solar days (360). It's all laid out in a book by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar called *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Architecture* [1971]. If you divide a circle at three points, it will be a triangle. In Islamic design the triangle is the intelligent human being. If you divide the circle at four points, it will be a square, and it can be North, South, West and East. Each element has a meaning in Islamic design. The five sides of the pentagon are the five senses. The six sides of the hexagon are the directions, forward, backward, right, left, up, down. The hexagon also reflects the six virtues: generosity, self-discipline, patience, determination, insight and compassion. All the mosques in Iran, with all the flowers and the leaves and curves, and so on, are based on hexagons. Even Islamic rugs are based on hexagons.

Sol LeWitt had his square, and it was wonderful how far he went with the square. For me everything connects with the hexagon. And the hexagon has the most potential for three-dimensional sculpture and architectural forms. I have made some small maquettes of possibilities for making hexagon sculptures. They can be either very large in the landscape or small in the house.

You were influenced by architecture, since the mirrors that inspired you were used as architectural elements.

MSF: I have always been greatly influenced by architecture and architects. A mutual friend of ours, James Ingo Freed, once told me that he could build a

villa for me from one of the drawings I made when I learned about geometric design in 1974. I asked the craftsman I was working with, ‘How do you connect this form to this other one?’ He explained, ‘With this hexagon you can create many things, madam; you can raise it up and then the hexagons connect with pentagons, like on a soccer ball. It has one hexagon in the centre and pentagons all around. And with these forms you can create infinite variations.’

They are almost like fractals. And the designs obviously have to do with the Islamic principles. It is not just geometry, it is mystical.

MSF: Yes. At that time, in the mid 70s, several books were published on the meaning of geometric design. One of them was by Issam el-Said, who was the grandson of the prime minister of Iraq. I really studied these books, and then created a lot of new works. I had an exhibition of my geometric designs [Untitled Solo Exhibition, 1976] at the Iran–America Society, a cultural centre in Tehran, which is how I met Denise René.

Denise René, the avant-garde gallerist in Paris, who showed a lot of the kinetic artists.

MSF: After she saw my work at Jacques Kaplan’s gallery in New York, Denise came to Tehran and saw the show; this was in 1976, I think. She said she wanted to meet me. So I went there, and we looked at the work. I explained what it was and so on, and she offered me an exhibition in Paris. I didn’t know who she was, and I didn’t know the gallery at all, but I was so happy I picked her up in my arms and spun her around. She was a very petite woman.

Then after Paris she gave me an exhibition in New York, and whatever didn’t sell, I put into storage in New York. Later, during the Revolution, many of my works were lost, but I still had those left.

I’m curious, what was your relationship to abstraction at that time?

MSF: I'm sure my American artist friends influenced me somehow, if only unconsciously.

You speak often about your connection to Islamic geometry, but does your geometric order and structure come solely out of Islamic design?

MSF: Frank Stella is one of my heroes. De Kooning as well. And Rauschenberg too, and he even worked with glass. I'll always remember when I first saw his work in 1958 when I was in Venice for the Biennale. I saw them again in Stockholm – the work with the goat in the middle of the tyre, his Combine work. These pieces moved me so much. I said, 'My God, where is art going? Look at how much possibility there is!' But for me inspiration always comes from Iran, from my history, from my childhood, for better or for worse. I always go with the feeling of my eyes, and with my heart, and that is my main inspiration.

That leads us to the topic of memory. At the moment you are working on Hejleh [The Light of the Ones I Respect]. It is a kind of monument you made for the memory of the Iranian poet, the memory of the masters of the coffee-house; it is also for the memory of your late husband and your brother-in-law.

MSF: The mirror is a symbol for water in Iran. Water is bright and reflects light, so it is a sign of light and life. If somebody dies young – a male, not a female – they make a monument with mirrors, electric light, feathers and flowers and place it at the corner of a street. I love them so much that I put one in front of the gallery when I had the first exhibition of my geometric mirror works at the Iran–America Society in 1973. After two or three days the director asked if I could take it down because everyone was asking if the American ambassador or the head of the cultural centre had died. The monument is a form of public art, and the people who make them are very talented and spontaneous.

The idea of memory in your work has to do with smaller pieces you've been steadily working on since the early 2000s, these

boxes called Memory Boxes. They are very different from Joseph Cornell's boxes; they are linked only in the sense that they are small boxes of memory.

MSF: I have made many of these boxes. In one of them, I put the hubble-bubble my mother used to smoke. The back of the box is black, meaning I have lost her. Again, it is a hexagon. Another one is about the village. There are some family members, a little dog from a toyshop, and a photograph of a 150-year-old painting I had that was lost. Whatever I found that was connected to Iran or to the family, I put in these boxes. I really had such a desire for Iran, to go back to Iran. I put in things that reminded me of what I missed.

Have you always kept a journal or a diary?

MSF: I did in Tehran, but since 1979 I have just made calendars. Every day I write what I have done – who called me and where I went shopping or what museum I visited – nothing intellectual. And I keep a telephone book, all the numbers of the people I know. I make one per year.

I'm very interested in your handwritings; they are almost like drawings of words. Your calligraphies are extraordinary, and they are an important part of your complex drawing practice, which also includes architectural sketches, geometric drawings, portraits, flower and plant drawings.

MSF: I like to write, but I don't have good handwriting and I'm not very literary. Whatever comes to my mind I write with a marker on a piece of paper. When the Revolution happened there was nothing I could do except listen to the bad news from Iran – Khomeini is coming, Khomeini is coming – and I just sat in front of the television doing calligraphy with a marker. And then later we had a house in the Hamptons, and there were flowers and birds and a dog and squirrels in the garden, and I drew those.

All your work with the flowers and plants – it's very interesting because we're living in a moment of ecological crisis when, as

Gustav Metzger says, more and more plants and beings are becoming extinct because of climate change. And you make this inventory of plants.

MSF: I was a very good gardener. I loved gardening, really. I had a magnificent garden in Tehran, three thousand square metres, with cypress and pine trees, influenced by the Japanese style. I had two gardeners, but I used to garden myself as well, and honestly, I enjoyed it better than even my artwork.

Maybe your gardening is a kind of artwork for you.

MSF: It's so relaxing, gardening. When I had the apartment on Fifth Avenue, after the Revolution – now that was really something unusual. It was art deco and art nouveau. [René Jules] Lalique had done the doors, glass this thick [*gestures*]. The owner had brought in a craftsman from Germany, and all the doors were inlaid with different kinds of wood.

A bit like in your own work?

MSF: The ceiling must have been eighteen feet high, domed, with gold leaf. The terrace was seventy-five feet long, overlooking Central Park, and you could look down and see the reservoir with a surrounding cloud of cherry blossoms. I made a hanging garden there, with a fountain, wrought-iron gating and so many plants. I bought a pergola, and I made it like a forest almost. That terrace was important because it led to my first big collage [Untitled Commissioned Mural, Royal Reception Room, King Abdulaziz International Airport, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia]; that was 1979, maybe 1980. One day workmen were doing some waterproofing on the terrace and they had a net to cover the tar, and I asked them for a piece of this net, and since I had nothing to do but sit at home and watch these people work, I made a small collage or two with newspaper and fabric. This first net was important; later I would put net over all my collages. It was something mystic for me again, the idea that I'm in prison, something is covering me up. Then somebody called from Boston and said that Saudi Arabia wanted to do a big commission, and I said I have nothing to show, my work is in

storage. But she insisted on coming to see me, and when she came, she saw this little collage and she said she wanted me to make one that was three metres long. But I didn't have a studio to make something like that. I told my friend Lucas Samaras that I had this commission but didn't know how I would be able to make it, and he said, 'Don't be silly; you have a dining room in your apartment, don't you?' So I ordered some lumber and made a table, and I ordered the stretchers, and I started making the collage in my dining room. I found velvet, sequins and glitter at the bridal shop, and beautiful objects that they had made for brides. I went on to make a lot of collages in that 'studio'.

This brings us to a very mysterious chapter in your work: a series of marriage certificates.

MSF: In olden times in Iran, when you got married they made a marriage contract, a beautiful one as big as this [*gestures*], with flowers and gold and geometric designs, and the best man writes the marriage contract in calligraphy. My mother's was like a booklet with a velvet cover; my aunt's was made of deerskin, very rare. My daughter was getting married in New York, and her marriage contract was just on a piece of paper, Xeroxed, stapled together, and this was an insult to me. So I made a marriage contract for my daughter with a leather cover. Then I made some more and gave them away for free.

One of the things that changed when you went back to Iran is that you really started to have a factory there, with a team of craftspeople working for you in your studio. Some of them are the last of their guild who are expert in the techniques you are using. You are now bringing together all the aspects of your language. You have been incredibly productive in the last decade – you have made an amazing body of work in the last year alone.

MSF: Thank you. Even now I have many more plans for future works. You have seen the latest group of sequential geometrical sculptures coming out of the wall that I made to show at Art Basel, Miami in 2009. I've made a

whole series of those – about ten works. I am planning to make adaptations of my work in rugs – I am making those now in Tehran – and then I'm going to make these forms also in jewellery, again using the hexagon and the pentagon and the square and the triangle, with gold and diamonds. I love to work! If I don't work, I get terribly bored. And anyway, I have to keep my craftsmen busy. [*Laughter*]

Yesterday you showed me a series of pieces with mirrors that can be assembled in different patterns according to your diagrams. They are almost like Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Map, because they can be folded and unfolded. The variation principle makes them very surrealist.

MSF: Yes, those are the *Convertibles* [2010]. I decided to do something different. I'm getting commercial art mixed with the art, because they are all about practicality. If a work has six segments, like puzzle pieces, you can arrange them in several different ways, depending on the space that you have in the house or on the wall. Or you can just put each one in a different room. I like to play with ideas of infinity. I have sketched out four, five, sometimes seven ways that they can be hung – some based on old patterns and some I just made up.

They are beautiful because they're about repetition and difference, and seriality.

MSF: Yes, it's geometry again that makes the whole composition complete. One part of it is traditional mirror work and the other part of it is my own drawing, my own design, to produce it.

They're also like maps, because it's like an unfolding.

MSF: Yeah. One of them looks like a Japanese fan, you can stretch it very long, and there's a triangle in the middle.

You also showed me a big mirror piece with an Iranian garden. It is almost like a map of a big garden, with an allée. How is the Iranian garden different from the English or French garden?

MSF: The Iranian garden is very classically beautiful. Cypress trees and water were the symbol of the Iranian garden.

They are symmetrical?

MSF: Yes, again, on the form of the square, like all the mosque architecture – everything is square. The piece that you saw that day, that is the Shazdeh Garden, the Prince's Garden, which was built for Abdolhamid Mirza Naserodolleh about a hundred and fifty years ago in the middle of the desert in Kerman. Actually, there is a very good book about Iranian gardens published by the [Tehran] Museum of Contemporary Art [*Gardens of Iran: Ancient Wisdom, New Vision*, 2004] which I used as research. This work is one of a series of four pieces that I created based on the garden, each featuring a central fountain and layers of trees, streams, paths, geometric patterns, and floral elements; they are unlike any other works in glass I have ever created [*Persian Garden*, 2009]. Three have a fountain of geometric forms – octagon, hexagon, pentagon, square, rotated around a triangle.

The fountain motif in these garden works is similar to the fountain installation you proposed to the Metropolitan Museum; I saw the maquette in your house in New York.

MSF: That's right, and they have accepted my proposal! The opening is going to be in March 2012, for the Iranian New Year. It's going to be about two and half metres

You have said that the piece you're proudest of in your life is Lightning for Neda [2009], the installation at the Queensland Art Gallery, commissioned for the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial, which is also made of six panel elements. It was too large for you to have more than two panels in your studio at one time, and you said that you were so moved when you saw it installed for the first time together.

MSF: Suhanya Raffel, the deputy director of curatorial and collection development and the gallery's curatorial manager of Asian and Pacific art,

was the lead curator for APT6. She called me from Australia after she saw our talk at Art Dubai in March 2008 to tell me how much she liked it and that they wanted to give me a commission. We went back and forth about the size and the budget – as the materials and craftsmen for something so large are expensive. In the end I said, ‘If you make a promise to me, to the memory of my husband, that it will stay there for ever, I would even do it for free.’ I really worked very hard on this piece, for nine months.

An installation twelve metres long – that’s like architecture. In this piece you used the same form but you repeat it differently. The way you use the mirror and paint behind the glass seems to almost liquefy these very hard materials.

MSF: And with the reflections, you’re also a part of the art piece. Your own picture, your own face, your own clothing ... If you move, it is a part of the art. You’re the connection: it is the mix of human being and reflection and artwork.

The mirror mosaic piece [Untitled Mural, 2006] you were commissioned to create for the opening of the Jameel Collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2006 also has to do with the immersion of the viewer.

MSF: Yes. It was also very large – and also used the hexagon. The Victoria & Albert Museum said they wanted me to do something on a wall at the main entrance, about ten metres by five metres. I took the measurements and made six panels and sent them to London. I went there for the hanging, and when I was there we realized that Prince Charles was coming and the security was very high. They gave me only twenty invitations. I have many relatives in London because after the Revolution many of them emigrated there, so it was me, my relatives, and Prince Charles.

Can we talk about your work in textiles?

MSF: Yes, the rugs I am making now are tapestries that you can hang on the wall or put on the floor. They are woven in exactly the same way a Persian

rug is woven. I have done two of these so far, and I have given them two designs to be made. One of them is very complicated and colourful, and three of them are simple, in a geometric design.

Who inspired you in this project? Obviously there have been many artists in the twenty-first century who have worked with textiles: Sonia Delaunay, Anni Albers—

MSF: I remember [Alexander] Calder once told me, ‘Monir, I will introduce you to the lady who is making my tapestry in Paris, and you should go there and make a tapestry’ – but at the time I didn’t.

Calder suggested that you meet her?

MSF: Calder was very sweet to me, very sweet. He invited me to go to his studio in Connecticut, and he gave me a small piece as a gift.

Do you have a collection of artworks?

MSF: I did, in Tehran. I had two [Claes] Oldenburgs, three or four [Tom] Wesselmanns, one Rauschenberg, two Frank Stellas, a Warhol Marilyn—

And where is the collection now?

MSF: I took all these works to Iran, and when the Revolution came they confiscated everything, took it all away and divided it up. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran has fifteen of my artworks. The government kept some, and they come up at auction. My Marilyn was just at Sotheby’s; Andy had written ‘to Monir with love’ on it, and it’s still in my frame with my address on the back. But what can I do? I could sue to get them back, but who knows what the government would do.

I was told that you used to have a salon in Tehran before the Revolution. You know, we are doing a salon in London called the Brutally Early Club now. I think we need salons for the twenty-first century.

MSF: Yes, we had a salon for artists. On the first Tuesday of the month, every month, we would hold open houses for the poets and writers and

painters and sculptors at home in the evening. They were all Iranian at that time; there were not any foreigners. Kamran Diba used to come, and with him was a group of artists, and I would serve one dish only, a very simple *abgosht*, a poor man's dish, with basically one whole lamb cut up and made into a stew, and then part is made into a kind of porridge called *gosht-kubideh*.

Food and music have always been important in salons.

MSF: Well, the food was very simple. The salons were mainly to get to know each other; there was no serious ceremony or dinner talk or anything like that. They were just for relaxing. The poets would recite their poetry, the architects would talk about their architecture, and so on. Some people would play guitar and a lady with a good voice would sing, and people would sit and talk on a gathering rug in the garden.

So who were the poets who came to your salon?

MSF: Naderpoor, Shahrودي and also Sohrab Sepehri – he was a painter and a poet too. Sepehri wrote very modern poetry. He minimized the poetry of Hafiz, which is very classical, like the Bible in Iran. I love modern poetry; my daughter Nima is named after the first modern poet I got to know, Nima Yushij.

Abbas Kiarostami has told me a lot about his connection to poetry, and Siah Armajani, another of your great friends, has told me that for him Iranian poetry is very relevant to his work. He lives in the United States, and often makes very political works.

MSF: Yes, he's really a great artist; he inspires me a lot. He built a bridge in Minnesota that is inscribed with a poem by John Ashbery. For the riots in Iran last summer, he made an artwork incorporating verses by Ahmad Shamlou, an Iranian poet who wrote poems against the politics of the Shah, and now Siah's using the same poem against this regime that exists now.

Your Rumi book project revolves around a poem.

MSF: Yes, a small publishing house in New York asked me to do a book on Rumi, the Sufi poet, and I wanted to do something nobody else had done. I bought a few sheets of steel, and worked on it with salt and acid. I thought I should do the circle, the dot, the triangle, the hexagon, a square and a cone, like that, until I had done the cosmos. And there's a map in there as well – the idea was my hope that one day they will prohibit guns and stop all the killing that is going on all around the universe; the rich man makes guns and sends them to Palestine or South America or South Africa, and it has to stop. The book came out all right, but they said that it is very expensive to make an edition of steel and we should do etchings instead and make silk-covered books. So I went to New Hampshire and learned how to do etchings. It will be an edition of fifty, but I have only made one book so far. It's not perfect. I did the Persian one and now I will do the English one. The translation has already been done.

Did you also do the calligraphy?

MSF: No, an Iranian artist named Golnaz Fathi did; she's very good. I gave it to her to write, and she made it like my drawing, with a pen with two points, and it looks like a mirror: each line has a shadow. The text is a poem by Rumi, about eighteen lines long, which has to do with the mirror. 'If you want to be a good human being, you must polish it, polish it, polish it.'

NANCY SPERO

I first met Nancy Spero in the studio she shared with her partner Leon Golub. They had an osmotic relationship in life and work: they had one floor divided by a wall into two studios and they'd talk through the wall even though they were in separate places. They are both very political artists, very active in campaigns, and as such are an inspiration for generations of artists who have followed. When I first went to meet Nancy Spero, I was really amazed by the cycles she was then working on: wall paintings that reframed the representation of women across the span of time. This first meeting led to twenty years of intense dialogue. She once talked about homeless fashion – fashion coming out of urgency, clothes as a shelter if you're homeless – and in the early 1990s we started to develop a whole project around this idea that fashion was not a luxury item. The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was considering hosting a show we'd produce together. We were invited by the director to present the idea at eight o'clock in the morning. Nancy Spero would never get up before noon (she worked at night) and it was unthinkable that she'd make this time. In the end, we managed to get there but the Metropolitan turned the idea down anyway.

Stealing creatively

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *In a couple of weeks in Malmö, Sweden, you'll be showing this huge new cycle, Black and the Red III [1994], for the first time. What was the origin of the 'Black and the Red' series?*

NANCY SPERO: I was doing a series generically entitled 'To the Revolution' [1981]. I had some fertility figures that were inspired by Indian tribes in Alaska, and I made my own versions of them. I used a female fertility symbol – just a torso, from the top of the breasts to the thighs – with a figure I had taken from Greek pottery. It was a dildo dancer. I just put those two images together, thought of the Greek, and did it in black and red, which became the title of the diptych.

It's made up of two nine-foot panels, one on top of the other, or it could go in an elongated, extended linear format to eighteen feet. I was also thinking, in a rather ironic way, both of the Greek and then of Stendhal's novel about revolutionary times, *The Red and the Black*. So I did this, and then a few years later with five panels, this time using four images – two different fertility figures and two other figures. One was a Greek figure; she's dancing. I transformed this figure. There is usually a transformation; the figures I use in the work aren't literal, but are recognizable for what their original place was.

You've transformed sources in other works, too. For example, you've taken male figures and transformed them into female ones.

NS: Yes, and that's what I did with one of these figures. She's dancing, and although it's quite an aggressive pose, it's also graceful. She's pushing her head forward. It's a transformation from a male figure. The movement was powerful. The other figure was from the Greek, as well, but that, too, was a

transformation. I put together two figures of women and I combined their dresses. And then one of the fertility figures had originally been a skull, like you find in the desert – the dried bone of a ram's head. I think it was a very old one. It looked like an ancient fertility figure to me. I gave it four breasts: the ears and eyes became breasts. Then I added arms under the breasts, similar to these ancient fertility figures – you know, the hands would hold up the breasts, just as you see now in porn magazines.

You use these mythological elements in your works in a very fluid manner. Is it a way of putting mythology into motion, of moving it into the present?

NS: Yes, it is. Actually, I describe myself as non-academic, and I like to feel it is a fluid, ongoing, open-ended process. And perhaps that's why I've done *Black and the Red III* now. Let me see: if I did the first one in 1983 and now it's 1994, there's an eleven-year difference between the two. I like to feel that there's a continuation from one series to the next, and from one work to another – that there's a relevance, even though my work has shifted and changed over the years from oil painting, to painting on paper, to hand-printing on paper, to collaging ... For one year in the early 70s, I also did a few pieces only with language.

In many of your ephemeral installations, but also in your permanent works [‘Premiere’, 1993] at the Ronacher [Theatre] in Vienna the figures are basically emerging from the paper or canvas and are floating or migrating.

NS: Exactly – they're literally dancing off the paper. There's no paper work at the Ronacher, but nevertheless that's the impetus for it, and then they play along the walls. That was a celebratory piece at the Ronacher. After all, it's a nineteenth-century opera theatre in which variety shows and all sorts of circuses and things went on. So it's light-hearted, and I took that into consideration. This wasn't dealing with tragedy or the grim realities of life that I also depict, so I chose some images of actresses that appeared during that span of the Ronacher and interspersed them along with some of

my usual cast of characters – my *personnages*, as I call them. There are ancient Egyptian flute and lyre players, musicians, acrobats, and an aboriginal figure that looks like an insect – and there's also Josephine Baker. I've done her in gold leaf. She's wearing bobby socks and waving her hand and smiling in a Josephine Baker way. I also have a very young Yvette Gilbert from a Toulouse-Lautrec drawing. She's looking across the room and down the stairs to an old Yvette Gilbert, and the old one is done in a shocking pink and is standing against a falsely painted column.

So these floating figures are like an infiltration.

NS: Yes, very much an infiltration. And the architect who did it, Luigi Blau, had a purpose in mind. It was the nineteenth century and carriages used to drive in, and I guess there were just columns in this foyer. They would drive up to the box office in the carriage, pay, and then drive out. But we don't drive up in carriages at the end of the twentieth century, so he filled in the walls and it makes a beautifully simple room. And he had the painter paint it blue. There were columns there, and the painter, in a play on the architecture, went along with him and painted some false columns. They came out in a bas-relief in the restoration. And then I, in turn, played with the columns and the architecture, having the figures run in and out behind the columns. The actresses are playing with the ancient figures and the other contemporary figures. For instance, I used a very coy photo of Mistinguette. It's a fan photo, and she's written 'Mes amitiés. Mistinguette' on it. So it's like she's being born on a half-shell, but she's actually being born from the hand of an ancient Egyptian acrobat. It's a very light-hearted piece.

Very non-monumental – but it's permanent non-monumentality.

NS: Yes, and it doesn't cover the architecture. This is a basic idea I have about wall installations – that the architecture should come through. I stamp the figures on and work on them, but they're relatively small. They take up their space – and they can take up a hell of a lot of space! – but they can also be confined or running around a small room like the box office.

Nevertheless the architecture does show through. It's not a mural in the conventional sense of the word.

In both your ephemeral and more permanent works, as well as in these infiltrations of space, there's almost a situationist idea of détournement – of deviating from things that already exist. It's almost as if you're calling into question all the ingredients, all the elements that are already there.

NS: I try to do that. I try to incorporate existing elements – to make it relevant to the location or the situation. I can't always do an exact transition or do what I did at the Ronacher. In Malmö, for instance, I first thought I would try to get some Swedish women's poetry and some images from myth, but somehow it just didn't prove feasible to work that way in Sweden – I had another agenda altogether. But in other situations, I have been able to relate these casts of female characters. In the mid 70s, I had joined an all-women's cooperative gallery in New York City, AIR [Artists in Residence], and before that I had been in some women's artist political action groups.

Women Artists in Revolution.

NS: That's right: WAR – Women Artists in Revolution.

And that was when you came back from Paris to New York?

NS: Yes, a few years later. Then there was the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists, in which Lucy Lippard played an important role. There had been a group of men and women who had done these actions in the late 60s called Art Workers' Coalition. Some of them were pretty wild! This was kind of simultaneous with radical women's groups, which I didn't really know so much about, except maybe peripherally. They were analysing the art world. There was – how shall I say – lots of money. It was during the Vietnam War, and there was money for art and for alternative spaces and things like that. The arts were flourishing, as they always do within restricted ways. But even some very well-known artists had joined this Art Workers' Coalition. A few of the women decided that the men were not addressing

the particular needs of women artists and so they formed WAR. However, I was not in at the inception of WAR; I was still with the Art Workers' Coalition.

And when you were in Paris, there were all the French feminist theories that appeared later.

NS: They appeared later, and I was not really aware of them, I must confess, until they were translated.

But in the same non-academic way, you were treating texts as you were treating images – using fragments. Gilles Deleuze once spoke of the vol créateur, of stealing creatively.

NS: Yes, exactly. That's really what I am, a *vol créateur* both contemporary and past. Also, in the early 70s, after the *War Series* [1966–70] and before I got into the women's series [*Torture of Women*, 1974–6], I took and fractured the language of Antonin Artaud. I did that because I felt it was a vehicle for my – well, I was very angry when I did the *War Series*, which peripherally or directly addressed—

The bombs.

NS: Yes, the bombs and helicopters. There are two subjects in that five-year series: bombs and helicopters, as you know. It's a very angry series. The *Artaud Paintings* [1969?–70] and the *Codex Artaud* [1971–2] are also very angry. I used the language, the writings of Artaud. I fractured them to show my anger and disappointment at the art world – and at the world as a whole. It was an existential stance, really. I couldn't find any other writer like him, and I still wasn't attuned to thinking of woman as subject. But in retrospect, whilst using Artaud's language, I realized that he was doing a lot of the things which women are accused of in a negative way, but which for him became almost *sacré*. He became this fabulously idolized outsider for French intellectuals. He was hysterical, he was adjudged insane, he felt silenced – and these were my main reasons for using his writings. He talked very often about his tongue being cut off, about being castrated. You see, as

an artist, I felt that I couldn't get the work out. I felt so frustrated; there was no entry, somehow – I couldn't get a toehold. I mean, I had exhibited in Paris, and in Chicago, where I'm from. That's where Leon Golub and I met. But nevertheless I still felt frustrated as an artist.

So it was about finding a new language.

NS: Exactly! So I invented it.

First it was the paintings—

NS: Yes. They were small. I started collaging images, but I would make the *Artaud Paintings* and collage them on to a small piece of paper nineteen inches by twenty-five or twenty-five inches by nineteen – collaging the head or the painting of a figure on to it. I started with Artaud, using classical images, intermingling them with contemporary figures, and then with my left hand I would write. Very briefly, I would fracture a quotation from Artaud on to this. I just scribbled it with my left hand to make it look more insane. After two years of that, I decided I wanted to expand in space and I tried painting again – and I hated it. I had stopped painting on canvas in 1966 when I decided to do the *War Series*. It was kind of a personal rebellion against the art world and against doing any 'important', commercially viable work. Not that I was selling anything, but it was an act of defiance – sticking my tongue out, which I did a lot in the Artauds. I literally had a lot of tongues sticking out: they are phallic and they are angry and they are defiant tongues. They're also razor sharp, and it's precisely this tongue that Artaud speaks about being castrated. But through my art, I symbolically attacked the art world. I even did this in the *War Series* when I did white-on-white paintings of victims around a crematorium chimney, using just a little bit of black or red to show the figures.

It's similar to when you had this transition to the Codex Artaud. A lot of your works after the Artaud paintings deal with the relationship between text and image – a presentiment not only of

what your work is doing now, but of something that's becoming very important in the realm of computers with hypertext.

NS: Yes, exactly. At this point I had rented Bulletin typewriters and I was quoting Artaud at greater length than I had with the left-handed writing, the graffiti-like writing. I also quoted some letters of his that he had written to Jacques Rivière, when he was a very young artist, for *La Nouvelle revue française*. The letters were pleading – I thought they were quintessential artist's letters begging to have a showing. He wanted his poetry printed. Jacques wrote letters back saying, 'You sound like a very interesting young man.' And finally he said, 'Come to my office. I would like to meet you.' It's ironic, but eventually these letters – never Artaud's poetry – were printed. I can't recall the name of the magazine. So anyhow, with the *Codex Artaud* and my desire to expand in terms of space, I started gluing together some of the art papers I had around the studio, because I didn't want to go back to painting. That's how this extended linear format started in 1971 with the *Codex Artaud*.

And with the scrolls, too.

NS: Yes, both. They were mostly horizontal, but some were vertical as well. And then in 1972 I did a *Codex Artaud* that was twenty-five feet long.

After beginning to use text and images with the Codex Artaud in an increasingly interwoven way, you worked on the Notes in Time on Women [1976–9], which is an almost encyclopaedic piece using a great variety of different sources and quotations. How did these sources come together? Did it begin with an open archive, or was it more the result of accidental encounters?

NS: It was more like an open archive. Leon, in particular, was alerted to what I was doing, as were a few friends. Sometimes he would find something in his readings that I had not seen: the books in my room are a little different to the books and magazines in his room. It was actually a very arduous process, but again, there wasn't any academic rigour in this. It had to do with showing the situation and status of women through historical

time – hence the title, *Notes in Time on Women*. I wanted to show many aspects, but it turned out to be about all the misogynous, really denigrating things philosophers, mostly men, had said about women's situation through the ages up to the present. I was asking myself, 'What can I do to counteract this?' I'm not a philosopher, I'm not a scholar in any way, but I have this very powerful impetus to say something that brings women to the fore, whether they are well known or anonymous. Women's history has been undermined very much by *history*, both politically and in the arts. So I began painting and drawing figures of powerful athletic women running through and leaping over all these quotes. For instance, I have a nude female athlete painted in collage jumping over a Derrida quote that's kind of splayed, like in a fountain. The language is done in a semicircle of lines in which Derrida talks about the essence of woman being nothing and then says the feminist woman is a man. So I had this tough woman athlete, legs akimbo, just leaping over his quote. I also have a figure that I drew running through some misogynous quotes from Nietzsche and from other contemporary French philosophers.

In the Notes in Time on Women, I also feel there's a different notion not only of space, but of time. There's a rupture in this linearity of male history writing.

NS: Well, it's a non-sequential approach. Linearity means putting things in their proper order or trying to pigeonhole them in a way, whereas I have messed things up by putting an ancient Hittite goddess together with a contemporary female athlete or an Egyptian acrobat or the goddess Nut or Marlene Dietrich, for instance – a modern goddess. I don't know if that answers your question.

Would it be fair to call it a palimpsest, a kind of stratification?

NS: Yes, definitely. And it gives me great freedom.

You once added the notion of the peinture féminine to that of the écriture féminine. How do you see this from today's point of view?

NS: When I read about *l'écriture féminine*, I got excited about what I was trying to do as a visual artist and, rather facetiously I think, I said to John Bird that I was doing *peinture féminine* because it had to do with the writing of the body. I was using women's bodies in all sorts of guises. I wanted to show difference amongst women, not similarity. I wanted to show the differences in time and cultures and not to be a centralist. I wanted to investigate the images of women from the past to the present. I am not a goddess-worshipper or anything like that, but I react when I see some of the goddess images because they are so beautiful and powerful. We all are complex and have various aspects that the gods and goddesses seem to have – their positive and their dark sides. I have used Sheela na Gig – an ancient pagan image from the northern British Isles. They don't know much about her: it's a very childlike figure and she doesn't have ears and usually has no breasts. She's portrayed in a kind of squatting position, her legs are apart, and she is opening up her vagina. It is both a fearful image – of death and destruction, the place of burial – and, at the same time, the opposite – an image of birth and fecundity.

*That kind of dual symbol is very interesting in this context.
There's a book by Elisabeth Bronfen that just came out about the
representation of women in a still-male-dominated art history.
The book is called Over Her Dead Body [1992], and it shows
that, in many of the representations, women are depicted as the
dead Other.*

NS: That's interesting. This comes up in the work of a lot of the contemporary and not-so-contemporary French writers. One of them talks about the male contemporary philosopher fucking the still-warm corpse of these prostitutes to get his philosophical ideas. In a way, that parallels what you're talking about, doesn't it?

*Yes – and this leads to your installation based on Bertolt Brecht
[The Ballad of Marie Sanders, the Jew's Whore, Smith College of*

Art, 1990; see also Woman/War/Victimage/Resistance, Project of the museum in progress, 1994–5].

NS: Yes, the installation uses a Bertolt Brecht poem or ballad written during the Nazi era, in 1934 or 1936. It's about a young woman who sleeps with a Jew. The woman is forced to walk down the street in disgrace, her hair chopped off and her slip askew. She's probably walking to her death. Evidently this happened quite often. A year before I found this Brecht poem, Leon came across a photo in a magazine of a bound woman; she's nude except for her stockings and shoes, and the stockings are rather dishevelled and she is bound very tightly. She has a gag on and there's a rope around her neck; she's about to be hanged. If you look at it briefly, it looks like porn. Under the photo, it reads in French, 'Found on a member of the Gestapo.' So it means that this soldier or officer had taken a picture of this woman who was about to be hanged. It's really grim. I'd made a plate of the photo and hadn't known what to do with it until I read the Brecht poem, and because they were from the same era and of a similar subject, I put them together. I first did the installation at Smith College, which is remote from New York City – it's a women's college, an East Coast establishment school.

There are other works you described as 'victimage' – on Vietnam, for example. Is this an open series that you're still working on?

NS: Yes. I've left it open. With Vietnam, I was painting directly on paper in the 60s. Now, I use some of the photos I saved from the war era, and I've copied them. I did some drawings of an old Vietnamese woman; to me, she's a symbol of a survivor. I have her walking off piles of corpses; she has a cigarette in her mouth. I have mothers and children. And these figures appear on the walls in Paris. France, you know, was more than intimately involved in Vietnam before the Americans. That exhibition is under the title of 'War and Memory' ['War and Memory: Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Retrospective Exhibition', The American Center, Paris, 1994].

Another recent work of yours is one you made in Northern Ireland in public space 'Four Cities Project', Well Woman Centre & Westland/Bucher Street Junction, Derry, Northern Ireland, 1990.

NS: Yes, Derry, Northern Ireland.

Was it the first time you had used the migrating figures in an outside space?

NS: Yes, it was. And it turned out to be highly controversial. Derry is very highly politicized, of course – it's a war zone. The British troops are there, and they're so young – my God, there are eighteen-, nineteen-year-olds in these tanks. There are political murals, some more temporary than others, all over the city. The director of the Orchard Gallery, Declan McGonagle, and some others had made agreements to find six sites for different artists to do works for a temporary show. And I was one of those invited. I was given this wall and was supposed to do a mural on it, but the idea that an American – or anybody from outside of the city – was taking over this very precious wall led to a big discussion, because exhibiting space in Derry is so limited. So I had a huge discussion with a representative from this group of artists. I ended up doing the mural, but this group of mostly younger, working-class Irish women somehow misinterpreted my intent and they began to assert that it wasn't a collaborative work – even though there were three young Derry artists assisting us.

The content was related to the political situation in the 70s.

NS: In the 90s, I honoured the political actions of Derry's women with a frieze of Greek goddesses – Athena and a symbolic figure, a Greek figure, and contemporary athletes in friezes around images of Derry women like those banging on the garbage lids when the British troops arrived in 1971. I did this back then in honour of their political activities. But with the more recent project, there was another enormous discussion about the mural, and I was attacked for two and a half hours by one half of the audience, and supported by the other. Finally, at the very end, I said, 'Paint over it if you must.' I really understood their frustration, because the question of public

art is a sensitive one. You arrive somewhere and you do your artwork and when you leave, you ask yourself, ‘Does what I’ve done relate to what the local citizenry wants?’ I felt quite palpably then how delicate and invasive these things can be. But, in some cases, there’s also the potential for dialogue. That was one wonderful thing about doing the mural: the Irish are not shy – it’s a speaking culture, so it was wonderful how all the people would come up and speak to us when we were working on it.

As my last question, I’d like to ask you about your use of particularly strong colours in your recent work. Is this linked to an emotional quality?

NS: Yes. It’s almost like I wanted to continue the format and thinking about space. After all, I take over my space, too – not in the conventional sense of a canvas, a rectangle in front of me, but peripherally. I was thinking about colour. We were in Spain and saw the wonderful museums: they have these heraldic flags. So in a way I wanted *Black and the Red III* to be heraldic, like a flag. And the celebratory works have a political intent – to show women as a strong, physical presence. It’s almost utopian – a way of saying that there’s a sense of possibilities. It’s about women being in control of their own bodies – the woman as protagonist.

Among friends

NS: Not all scientists are for the good of the people. If machines get too intelligent, it could all turn into something that’s very much about control and evil. Jokingly, I remember when I was using those old-fashioned electronic typewriters in my art for quotes, and honest to God, I really thought they suddenly had a life of their own. I really had a sense of that.

MOLLY NESBIT: Do you not feel that way with computers?

NS: I don’t participate in computers – that’s for young ’uns! [*Laughs*]

LEON GOLUB: There was a moment in time, maybe several moments in time, when organisms somehow developed a kind of primitive consciousness.

Chemicals became consciousness! There's going to be a moment in time, whether it's in one hundred or two hundred years, when we'll lose control over the robots, because they'll develop a consciousness and will say to each other, 'Forget these humans with their feeble notions of Utopia – we'll build a real Utopia!'

MN: That's *Blade Runner*, Leon!

LG: And beyond! That's really the future, I think.

The Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote We in 1920–21, which was first published in English in 1924 and influenced Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's Brave New World. These are all dystopias.

NS: Utopia, like heaven, is kind of boring in a way. In certain Scandinavian societies, it's not exactly Utopia, but it has been a bit more egalitarian, and the people have not suffered. But in terms of people's happiness or sense of well-being, there is still a realization that there's something missing. I personally think it's due to human nature. The only way we're going to have Utopia is if people live for ever and stay in good health. But that would probably turn out to be a terrible dystopia – the ruination of everything. Think what it would mean if everyone lived for ever, no matter who they were – the good, the bad and the indifferent. I think that the world would stop. Even with ageing populations now, in a certain way, the world is kind of stopping. In Asia it's still young, but Europe is growing older.

LG: One of the difficulties is that if we're going to solve all this, it means solving psychological problems as well. But if all of the causes, all of the sources, all of the irritations, all of the fucked-up situations we're always under – if you eliminate those, then what Nancy says is correct: life would be pretty boring. Everybody would have an optimum sex life, an optimum economic life, an optimum eating life. Everybody would be like everybody else.

MN: It sounds a bit like Southern California, doesn't it?

NS: Exactly. Southern California doesn't have the rip that New York does. How could I produce my art in California?

That's why it's so interesting you say something is missing.

MN: That's right. The idea of Utopia could be summed up in this one sentence by Brecht, that something's missing.

NS: I suppose there are certain people who are self-satisfied. I can't understand it; it can't be human. There's always something that comes along, and there's always something missing. How could it be otherwise? Even in people who have achieved great success, you see there's still something missing. Perhaps it's this hunger you speak about in artists ... but I also think it's in everyone. And it's insatiable.

LG: What's a Utopia? The Garden of Eden was a Utopia, and then of course women ruined it! That's what the Bible says! *[Laughter]*

MN: I think the Bible's been edited, myself.

LG: I'm joking of course, but the whole point is that this idea of Utopia goes way back, and probably every religion and civilization has elements of it – some kind of ideal location where all the anxiety you experience in your everyday life is not present. But things go wrong – the serpent shows up.

I'm very keen on following up on this link to Brecht. What triggered you to work with Brecht's poetry?

NS: I think what Brecht produced was absolutely monumental. A long time ago I was listening to the radio, and there was a programme on with Brecht's poetry in American translation. I heard 'The Ballad of Marie Sanders, the Jew's Whore', which I thought was fantastic. Inquiring into women's status is something that forever interests me, so I tried to obtain a copy of the book that contained the ballad. In terms of what I used it for, it just happened to fit in with the subject I'm trying to zero in on – that is, talking about women's sexuality and their condition. And it isn't just about middle-class American women and feminism, as far as I'm concerned – it's much more than that.

LG: How are you going to pursue this idea of Utopia, Hans Ulrich? What have you got planned?

We're going to send a letter to artists, similar to the Unbuilt Roads, a kind of questionnaire. We're also recording conversations and thinking about turning fold-outs and maps into a book, and we'll co-curate a project with Rirkrit Tiravanija for the next Venice Biennale [Nancy Spero's, Maypole/Take No Prisoners, 2007].

MN: I like that. This afternoon we were talking about sending out a letter, with lots of different strings to one central computer. We thought it would make sense to try and develop a chain of communication to let people know what other people are doing. This would help develop artist projects with layers, rather than just pot luck.

It would be interesting to ask politicians for their opinions.

LG: There are a few right-wing American politicians I would recommend writing to.

Who are you thinking of, exactly?

LG: Tom DeLay, for example. He's the guy who's most responsible for the reactionary stuff in the US Congress at the moment. But there's a whole bunch of these guys. There's a very good lawyers' group in the US called the Center for Constitutional Rights, and they're very active in civil rights. We can get you a couple of their names and could ask them about this ugly reality and this idea of a utopian solution, or partial solution. People like that, not just artists.

NS: I think it's a very good idea.

LG: You might have to send out fifty letters just to get one back.

NS: Tell that funny story about the guy in Ethiopia!

LG: Haile Selassie?

NS: Haile Selassie. This is a parable about power and control.

LG: During the 1930s, Haile Selassie was the emperor of Ethiopia. The Italians invaded and took over the country, and after the Second World War, Ethiopia became free again. There was a book by the Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński – a brilliant guy. He related lots of stories about the country in it. For instance, when the Italians invaded Ethiopia, Haile Selassie killed all the royal lions because they had not protected the kingdom. They were all in cages, so how they were supposed to have protected the kingdom is hard to say, but because he was so primitive in his thinking, he thought of them as power. He used to come into his court every day, and all the courtiers would be standing there, lined up. He would walk through and he had a little dog that would walk on their shoes and piss on them – the dog had been trained to piss on them, to show who was boss! Then there was a man who used to follow the dog and wipe off the courtiers' shoes, something he'd done for twenty years. Selassie is the guy to whom the US government and others said that you have to permit some more democratic liberties in the country. He didn't want to, but he was put under pressure, and finally he gave in. His prime minister or chief courtier told him he was making a big mistake, saying, 'When you open the door a little bit, you're never going to be able to close it again.' And opening that door led to the end of his kingdom – some sergeant led a revolt and took over the government.

Rem Koolhaas also mentioned that we should talk to Kapuściński.

LG: Another person to talk to is James Nachtwey – he's a photographer who's flown around the world and seen all its horrors. Ask a guy like that who deals with these kinds of things every day of the week. I've also read some articles by this guy called [Immanuel] Wallerstein. He's written about lots of social and political issues. You should ask him.

MN: He collaborated with Étienne Balibar.

NS: We're such a noisy table!

LG: Not as noisy as some.

MN: Come on, we're not even arguing!

NS: That's true.

LG: It's too dangerous to talk out loud about all this – it's such a dangerous subject.

I love the story about you having dinner with Liljana Stepančič and how she was really afraid of being arrested in New York when she had dinner with you because you spoke out against Bush and all the tables around started to pay attention.

NS: Isn't that interesting!

LG: I'm sure it's a little exaggerated. I'm sure she felt that way, but it's not as bad as she thought it was.

NS: But if Dan Rather, who seems so conservative, says to the public, as he did the other day, that criticizing the government doesn't mean that we aren't patriots ...

LG: That's because the Bush administration has tried to keep everything under wraps.

NS: That's what this is all about.

Last time we spoke, you mentioned another project – maybe it's related to this and maybe it's not – about things that have gone wrong. You both spoke about the idea of making useful mistakes.

LG: Oh yes, we talked about that. That would be a great book. It's a little bit like *Unbuilt Roads* – experiences you've had in the art world that have surprised or shocked you.

Unbuilt Roads is about identifying areas of practice that have not been possible or have not been facilitated by existing structures. So although there was a critical aspect in Unbuilt Roads, I think

the book on failures will go far beyond that because Unbuilt Roads is ultimately still about hope – these projects could still happen. Any museum could read the book and invite the artists to do one of the unrealized projects, so it's anchored in a pragmatic and optimistic approach. The thing about the failures project, however, would be that they can no longer happen, because something went wrong.

LG: Which, in a way, is more important than the failures of institutions. When an artist tries to do something and there are consequences that he or she didn't anticipate, it's interesting to see if they're willing to talk about it and what ultimately happened. If, say, you were doing an installation in a city and were expecting a certain kind of response, but got a different one that actually shafted you – that's the kind of stuff.

Has this ever happened to you?

LG: That's the problem: I'm not sure I have an example!

MN: Or you don't care to remember it!

NS: I'm sure I do, but I can't remember. Sometimes I've been so frustrated, so angry, so furious, but I can't think of any specific examples at the moment. That's the problem with sitting round a dinner table laughing and joking – you can't remember the frustrating times.

LG: Talking about things you've done that got so fouled up, that went so wrong that you still don't know what happened or ones that you're still upset about – now that would be really interesting. Artists are often very frank about these things. They're always dealing with situations that are problematic and they recognize this, as writers do, too.

What about politicians?

LG: Not so much – they hide it.

MN: Oh, artists do, too, especially with their earlier works!

In the 'Do It' project, Hans-Peter Feldmann said to take a photograph that you like out of any newspaper, frame it and put flowers next to it so that it becomes an homage. It has to happen the day before the opening of the show, it has to be from a daily newspaper, and it shouldn't be of a politician.

MN: That's hard to do, isn't it?

NS: That's kind of what [Christian] Boltanski does with his memorials, don't you think? In his installations, because of the ambience in which they're shown, they seem like victims.

LG: The kind of project you know would get you into trouble.

MN: You've got a lot of those!

LG: [*Laughs*] Projects that would be very difficult if you were to do them – to design a project you know would arouse hostility if it was carried out. That's the whole point: to design something you're not going to do, but that would get you into a lot of trouble if you did.

'The project that artists have never dared to do' – that would probably be the book we get the least responses about!

LG: For example, I once wanted to bomb the Museum of Modern Art, but of course I didn't do it. [*Laughs*] I held back! I decided I'd give them another chance.

NS: Actually, museums have been doing some offensive things lately – both the Brooklyn Museum and the Jewish Museum, for example. The Brooklyn Museum with the way they handled 'Sensation' [1999–2000] – that was offensive – and the Jewish Museum with a show in which younger artists treat the subject of the Holocaust ['Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art', 2002]. I haven't seen the show yet, but who knows the intentions of the curators or the artists in all of this? At any rate, under the guise of being very sincere, they've created a scandal.

LG: How about a book in which you ask a bunch of artists what the hell is wrong with the art world. You could have curators and critics, too. And you tell them, 'Don't do this if you're not going to be frank.' If you send that to two hundred people, you'd get a hundred and twenty-five good answers.

NS: Twenty-five million answers.

Is this linked to Utopia?

LG: It would mean that you could disillusion people about Utopia.

The jewel box

Is this a good moment for you to do the interview?

NS: It's OK. I'm just really quite a mess these days at organizing myself at all. I'm completely turned around: I'm up all night and in bed all day.

You work all night long?

NS: Well, I don't work at night any more because I need help and assistance when I'm working. I need the images and materials. So the whole thing is quite a mess. I don't know what I'm going to do. Now I've talked enough about me. Tell me about you, sir.

I'm contributing to a magazine that will come out for the Venice Biennale. But I've already seen the beginnings of this very exciting piece, which is basically a mobile installation in the air. Could you tell me more about how it works?

NS: The installation is a maypole. I cannibalize not only external things but also my own work: *Kill Commies: Maypole* [1967] is from the *War Series* paintings. And instead of pretty women at the ends of the ribbons, I have severed heads – just dripping, bloody heads. This new installation is a sculptural realization of that. *Maypole/Take No Prisoners* is a thirty-five-foot pole that will reach up towards the skylight and have long, colourful ribbons and chains attached. And from those chains will hang bloody, severed heads.

Where did the images come from?

NS: The heads were scanned and enlarged from a collection of extremely small drawings I did in the 60s. I have collaged many of these drawings into other works throughout the years: *Torture of Women*, *Codex Artaud* and, of course, the *War Series*. On this maypole, the ribbons are very pretty – a word I really don't like too much. 'Beautiful', 'handsome', 'attractive' are OK, but 'pretty' is not good. I turned it violent. We're printing the heads on to aluminium, and they're mostly printed on both sides, although I've left some as is, to reflect the light. And I hope they'll bang into one another; it's a clanging sound. In the studio, the ribbons reach down to the floor and then out to the dancers, which happen to be the heads.

I'm the activator of all this. In a way it's deceptive: I say 'maypole' and 'heads' and 'beautiful ribbons', and then you look at it and realize what it is. It's very tough. Actually, it has this combination of the festive and the frightening – very much like what's happening so often in our own world. You hear about what's going on in Iraq and the frightening things that this president of ours has led us into. This is not a pretty world we're in. I'm very fearful and angry. The *War Series* – that was done forty years ago.

That's very interesting because there's a link between this current work and your War Series, which was done during the Vietnam War.

NS: Exactly. What is the difference? It's a terrible continuum, isn't it? It's due to our terrible leaders here. Can you believe how the people have allowed this? It's hard to believe how the Americans have allowed him to get away with this. It's incredible.

You protested against the war in another exhibition [‘Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American–Vietnam War’, 2005–6] that brought back the Vietnam works. It was organized by Catherine de Zegher. Could you tell me more about this recent piece?

NS: Again, I cannibalized the *War Series* and, for the first time, instead of having images of women or goddesses dancing around the walls, I used images from the *War Series* on the walls of the Drawing Center.

You revisited the drawings of the bombs and the helicopters.

NS: Yes. It was about revisiting the *Vietnam Series* [1966–9] and bringing it up to the present with Iraq and what we're doing there. And so I think it's a continuum. For God's sakes, it's horrible! It's absolutely horrendous when you think about it. That war easily slides into this one.

Although revisiting your images of the bombs and helicopters from the Vietnam Series can be considered repetition, what you've done is nevertheless very different from your drawings from the 60s. Could you perhaps tell me about this subject of repetition and difference, which I think is very recurrent in your work?

NS: Once again I used the same technique I've used in my other wall installations – only this time I shifted the imagery and made polymer-printing plates from images from the *War Series*. It was rather exciting to do this. I used male and female bombs, as well as helicopters shitting out victims. It was as scatological as ever, and the victims on the ground were writhing.

But there's also writing in Vietnamese; it's from a poem by an eighteenth-century woman poet [Ho Xuan Huong]. It's very sexual, but it's about a war, too.

For the *Maypole*, there is, again, another transformation from the *War Series* to a way of redrawing and making new images. So when one looks at it, it appears to be celebratory. Like I say, it's a weird combination of the celebratory and the horrendous – but what is it celebrating? It's celebrating the death and destruction that the Americans have brought on the world once more. And, again, I am so dumbfounded that this continues – that this would be allowed to happen again, right under our noses here. What is wrong with the human race, and Americans in particular? I can't understand

it. It's really beyond my comprehension. And the only tool I really have is my artwork, and this is thanks very much to being in a partnership with Leon Golub. He was always very powerful and direct in what he said, and so that gave me courage to just go ahead even more with what I was doing. That's something I always did, but, in a way, I picked up on his directness and statements.

So it's this idea of giving courage. I met the film-maker Jean Rouch, who inspired the French nouvelle vague. He was in his late 80s when I interviewed him in his office at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and he told me that the most important thing is to have immense courage.

NS: And, in the end, it does take immense courage, just as Leon had.

I wanted to talk about your studio for a moment. There are all these tables populated by an extraordinary polyphony of protagonists. I'm curious to know more about them.

NS: I have five hundred or so. My younger son, Paul Golub, who is in theatre, has what's called a stock company. That's a group of actors, both men and women, who act and stay together; occasionally new ones come in and others leave. In the stock company, these actors are used interchangeably and many of them play parts that range from the tragic to the amusing and then back again – all over the place, in any kind of production. In a way, I have a stock company, but mine is enormous. Five hundred! I use what I now consider the actors in a theatre – the stars of the productions. The stars are those actors – those images – that I call up most frequently and have used and reused over and over in various situations.

Each of them is an individual painting.

NS: Exactly. From those individuals comes a whole theatre production; instead of starting from scratch, I have images I add to continuously and they occur over and over again. Maybe not most of them, but let's say I would use and reuse fifteen or so of the images.

Which ones have you used the most?

NS: There's an athletic woman running forward, about to jump. The original figure that inspired me to do my drawing was an Olympic woman. She's running forward and has one arm up as though she's been pushed back; if she were in water, she would push back water, but in air she's pushing back air to go forward. She's a rather attractive, handsome woman, long of leg and powerful of build. I have used her naked and with vines over her body, which are transformative. She could be rushing off in celebratory mode or rushing off to a tragic situation. It's a compelling image.

That's a recurrent, almost eternal return. But then there are also some goddesses that recur frequently.

NS: Absolutely. Artemis. A for Artemis is at the beginning of the list alphabetically and image-wise. The goddesses, as is true of the gods, have many aspects to them of the eternal, which range from the tragic to transformation into a state of pleasure or even extreme excitement or happiness. The original Artemis I drew was from a sculpture at the Louvre in which Artemis has one hand – again, isn't this something? – one hand reaching up like the hand of the athletic woman, the woman in the Olympics. Artemis has a hand on the head of a doe. She hunts, and is reaching for an arrow from the quiver on her back, and her other hand is very gently on top of the animal that she's petting.

Another image I reuse is of a torso, and that would be from the Alaskan goddess. It's used as a fertility figure and it's cut off, so there's just the torso up to the neck and down to the crotch, with no arms or legs. That becomes an abstracted body, although it's still female. It's a heavy body – a substantial, goddess-like figure that could be sculpted. It's a sculpture that one could hold and handle or even caress, or it could be a large sculpture one would look at from a distance on a table or a stand. Another one is an early image of a woman I drew in profile, running; she's running very fast. We see her sideways and one just sees it flat, as the image of an outline. A

woman walking or running in space. There's also the goddess Medusa, who has snakes curling around her head.

I'm also curious to know more about the relationship between text and image in your work. If you think about Notes in Time on Women from the 70s, and about Codex Artaud, these were very text-charged pieces. In recent years, there has still been some text, but to me it seems that these many hundreds of protagonists have become something akin to an alphabet. In a way, it's another form of language – more with images than with letters. Is this a fair way of describing it?

NS: You've explained it beautifully; it's like a language. And the goddesses would be like the birthplace of language. Early, in the *Black Paintings* [1961–5], I did a torso with wings but no arms. It was a tall painting, from the top of her legs to the neck, and she is multi-breasted – she has four breasts and wings and her head is sideways. I painted the mouth open. I then inserted a figure in the mouth, assuming that this goddess with the wings was giving birth to language, to speech. It's very good you brought that up. With these images, the goddesses that give birth to human attributes – like the ones I did of language and of the body running – are mainly making sense of the human body and what it means in the world. In a certain sense, that reflective kind of art is a realist way of addressing the self. It might be repetition of language or action. With the goddesses, there's a huge range of what they might do or how they might be powerful. There's birth and there's death and I have images of figures lying down, as if that's the end.

I don't know why, but the goddesses are fulsome figures for the most part; they are strong and heavy in a way, rather than thin, although I do have a thin goddess – very tall and elongated, and she turned into the running figure, the subject of lots of paintings. A lot of these images are the precursors of language; symbols turn into a language – an alphabet if you will – of these images moving in space, and then they start to make sense in an abstract way.

I remember we had just finished the layout for the Point d'ironie [2005] when suddenly you took out those boxes containing thousands of additional compilations. You have the compilations on your tables, and there is—

NS: My jewel box.

Exactly, your jewel box. In these jewel boxes there are several hundred personages. They are personages with a floating identity. You started to add these populations to the Point d'ironie, on the bottom. I was wondering if you could talk about the status of these large populations.

NS: In a sense, the populations in my jewel box – I call it my jewel box – are the diminutive of the others. I've scaled them way, way down and they do become jewels of sorts because cutting them out and preparing them is much more time-consuming than, say, cutting out and taking care of the larger works. There's a bigger gesture in cutting out a bigger image, whereas with the smaller ones, we have to use little scissors. It's almost like a little surgical procedure; you cut it out painstakingly. I was looking at them and was a little critical; some of them were a little rougher than I had thought. They need a little bit more manicure. They're rough.

There are the standing ones and the running ones.

NS: The categories are from the antique to the contemporary, and I don't know about the futuristic yet because everything is subsumed in the present. These jewel-box images get used, and then they get shoved back into the jewel box. I don't lock them away – they're not the kind of jewels you have to guard by putting them in a bank vault. They're out there in the open to be looked at or maybe to be added occasionally to the larger images. I can't quite remember why I started doing this, creating the smaller images that have undergone so much surgery. It was something particular that I was doing, but I can't remember why.

Many of your works are very perishable: they're done as wall paintings or prints on walls, or they're done more like a collage. And then sometimes the work becomes more permanent in a very non-monumental way. One of the things that's happened over the past couple of years is your extraordinary project in the subway in New York. Could you tell me about your subway station? Your personages have become more permanent.

NS: Yes, that's true because those personages are a mosaic inside the subway. They represent creativity. I have one who's an opera star in a golden gown, raising her arms, singing. And as the train goes by, her arms move to the side, and then they go up and then down again. On the other side, downtown, it goes the same way, down and then up and then down. And that's a voice of speed as long as the powers that be keep it in the bowels of the earth at Lincoln Center. I'm pleased that my subway mosaic project is located there because the opera is there – the music is right there.

Nancy, a question we haven't addressed today is the one about unrealized projects. I've asked you this many times before, but I'd like to know more about your unrealized projects – your unbuilt roads.

NS: Let's see, what grand schemes? Well, I'll tell you, my unrealized projects are grand in scale. I've done over two dozen wall installations all over the place, and so for a while my main work was this hand printing on walls. It's very transient; it's mostly nomadic because once the show is over, it gets painted over. It's totally finished except for the documentation. But now I'm interested in realizing works of great scale and permanence.

And it has only just begun.

Artists and curators

I saw your wonderful show of the Black Paintings from the 50s in Paris at Lelong Gallery. We never spoke about these important

paintings from the 50s. They look as though they had been made today.

NS: Except if you look at the surface, because a lot of them are cracked. But I'm glad you say they look contemporary.

At the time you made them it was the heyday of existentialism. Are they existentialist paintings?

NS: They relate to Leon's paintings. People accused me being influenced by Leon Golub. Of course I was influenced by Leon: we were working together, speaking together, and I changed what I was doing into a more 'in your face' approach. But I did it in my own way. Mine was more lyrical, but also more deathlike. Leon's wasn't like that: his was more confrontational. Mine was the way that describes women's position philosophically; what Simone de Beauvoir said: not parallel, but at an angle. Men's art was more confrontational, like a bang.

These Black Paintings aren't oppositional; it's a different kind of resistance.

NS: It's the time of Sartre, and it's existential. These figures are stuck together. Usually they are male and female, but they can be many things: from males to females, from females to males.

They are androgynous paintings.

NS: Definitely. In a film by John Waters, there's a young woman. The wind is blowing and a very pretty – I don't think beautiful – but a very attractive woman walks up a hill and she has a house-dress on and the wind keeps blowing. But then she opens up her dress and closes it and we see that she's a man with a woman's face. You expect her to be a nude female, but she is extremely male. Leon and I saw it together; it was shockingly beautiful. I was genuinely moved.

*You were saying that the Black Paintings were done at night.
There was also a joke with Leon.*

NS: Leon started to paint during the night, too. He was attracted by the glamour and freedom of working at night. So I teased him, saying, 'Your paintings look better in the dark.' That was a naughty thing to say. But one *could* actually see them from outside, and these giant aggressive figures were ferocious.

Can you tell me more about the production of the Black Paintings? You used dark colours over very bright colours.

NS: First dry and beautiful colours. That was the beginning of using Shiva, so I used the best and most beautiful colours, and I painted and repainted and scrubbed and they turned very grey and very black and I would scrub more and more and the images would appear. It was first painting and then scrubbing it out.

It was an erasure of sorts. The Paris show at Lelong took place this year [2007] and gathered many of your Black Paintings.

NS: Did you see the catalogue? It is wild; it is just black. The one on the cover is an anomaly; it's the only one I did of its kind, and then inside the catalogue it turns all black.

Can you tell me more about the one on the cover?

NS: That happened when I was doing the *Black Paintings* and I guess I got irritated. I did get irritated sometimes: with the art world and the world. It is a reversal. *Homage to New York (I Do Not Challenge)* [1958] means that I do challenge the idea of the homage to New York. There was this tombstone and on the side of the tombstone I had these heads, and they are sticking their tongues out – they are tongues of defiance and ridicule, and I signed 'Nancy Spero' under this and I got initials from *Art News*, which was *the* magazine of New York at the time. I got all these names that came up in articles and I put the initials in the paintings; it's the art-world figures who appear. I was very angry, feeling frustrated. I wasn't getting my message out; I was overlooked.

There was no reaction?

NS: No, hardly. I had a show of the *Black Paintings* in Chicago at the Renaissance Society. There is an American expression: 'left field'. Leon and I have always been left field. Not really with the mainstream.

I wanted to talk to you about Lawrence Alloway. You remind me of him, in that you're as far-reaching as he was. And, like you, he wasn't intimidated by things that are hip or in the most powerful and fashionable galleries. I mean, of course you work with people who are quite in the swing of things, just as he did.

Where did you meet him?

NS: He came to the US after he was curator at ...

... MoMA?

NS: At the Guggenheim. He was there for a year. And then he met Leon, who was in some show right away. Lawrence was at the Guggenheim for only a year before he got a professorship outside of New York with tenure [at Southern Illinois University].

So he stopped working in museums?

NS: Yes. It was much more secure. In any case, we got to know them because he and Leon had been going around that year. Leon told Alloway about me. I had a show in Paris, and Alloway went and saw it. He wrote a lovely letter to Leon about my work – it's in my files somewhere. It was so lovely, and he did it spontaneously – that's so like you, the way you do it your own way. He did it in his own way.

You still have the letter – that's amazing.

NS: I do someplace. So Alloway promised me a show almost right away. It's amazing: no one would ever act that way except for you. I really think you share that with Lawrence – when you respond to something, you do it and don't go into all this other nonsense. So, anyhow, he promised me on a show at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts]. That's how I got to know them – him and his wife, Sylvia Sleigh, the artist. We all became very

friendly, and they knew a bunch of young critics who were very influenced by Lawrence.

Sylvia did a portrait of a whole bunch of them naked. She was always doing that kind of thing. They had all these dinner parties; Sylvia was a very good cook. And so there were always all these parties at her house. And she had a dishwasher, so she made these dinners. And, of course, I had to reciprocate. So during that early period we were very busy socially for quite a while with the Alloways. Isn't that funny?

Can we talk about Lucy Lippard?

NS: I just saw her.

Did she come to see you here?

NS: I was so naughty. She was presented with an award a while back, but I felt so ill when she was here, and due to my strange habits I was too tired to meet with her during the day. So I cancelled, but later I thought, 'Oh my God', so I called her without realizing it was very late at night. This only occurred to me after I'd talked to her for a few minutes, though, because she was really quite terse. And then I realized why: it was the middle of the night! I thought she would never talk to me again. But, sure enough, she called me; it was just a week or so ago. She came over and we had a really terrific, nice meeting. She's a very vital person, and she's really smart.

She's a very original curator.

NS: Very much so, and she's written tons of books. And she wrote a wonderful Eva Hesse book.

Have you ever worked with her?

NS: Yes, a little bit. When I had a show about the 'Torture of Women', she wrote the introduction. She's written very well about me, and about Leon, too. I think she had her fill of New York, and she left and went down to the Southwest, where there's a small community of artists living and working. She's been there for years. And she's always earned her money not by

teaching, but by being invited to give talks and going to see artists' work. She's always on the go.

Nancy, looking around your studio, it's very exciting because once more it's been completely transformed in the most extraordinary way. Tell me about the dossier you mentioned?

NS: Oh yes, it's over there. It has the American flag on top, which said 'Kill Commies!' on it. That's from the *War Paintings* [*War Series*, 1966–70].

It's a drawing from the 60s that's now producing reality.

NS: Definitely. At the time, the US was absolutely, wildly afraid of Communists. If anybody did anything or talked a certain way, they were accused of being sympathetic to Communism. It was insane here, Hans Ulrich. And so in the *War Series*, too – I'm jumping around here a lot – but what happened with these last two shows I've had in New York was that I misunderstood Catherine de Zegher about the show at the Drawing Center. I thought it was a one-woman thing and that we'd chosen the work I was going to exhibit. But it turned out that I was only one of four artists in the Vietnam show.

And this was at the Drawing Center?

NS: Yes. I got very nervous and upset, and I thought, 'I have to get in touch with Catherine because with the three other artists, I'm not going to show what I had planned on showing.' I had planned on being absolutely contemporary, but then I came up with this idea of doing a wall installation, cannibalizing my own work from the *War Series*. I told Catherine about my idea. At first she put up resistance to it, but after some convincing, she gave in. She said, 'Nancy, I'll have to give you the two big walls.' And I said I'd take them! But it also meant that I couldn't ask for any money because usually when I do that, I arrange for an institution to pay for the main people that are printing, and that's expensive. I promised them a lot of money, and I had to make a lot of plates. I ended up spending a lot of money myself doing this show, but it was worth it. So I feel that I started

my career, like with AIR, paying for my shows, and I'm finishing my career kind of paying for my shows, just as I used to.

Yes, but it was your own space this time.

NS: It was Catherine's space. She was really gracious, more than gracious – generous. And I was very happy to have the two big walls.

There's not only a link between your work now and with AIR at the beginning of your career, but also between the Vietnam War and the war in Iraq today.

NS: Of course. People are always asking me whether I've done something about the Iraq War, and I say, 'No, I think the work I did for Vietnam is relevant to today.'

There are always so many readings. Your art isn't illustrative, but ambiguous. And that's also true for the Venice piece because the fascinating thing about it is that it starts from this drawing with the flag – an image from the Vietnam War – but it could easily be an image from Iraq today.

NS: Yes, I hope so. It's meant to be general.

So after the Drawing Center, you revisited those sixty images, but something has happened because here it's not a translation from an image to another image, but from 2D to 3D. How did you come up with this extraordinary installation?

NS: Well, it was just a matter of thinking about it. I wanted to have a maypole, and to have these images – these severed heads. And, my God, with all these horrible amputations of hands, arms and heads in this war, these severed heads are even more a sign of the Iraq War. Think of the lovely journalist Danny.*

One of the things that's so powerful is that when you make the elements, they're almost like private works. And that's closely related to what happens at the two-dimensional level in the Codex

Artaud and in some of your other monumental works: very private, small-scale things form what you could call an 'archipelago monumentality'. It's not a continental monumentality, but more of an archipelago monumentality. It's not imposing.

NS: That's really interesting. It's almost life-size, but it's a monumentality that's meant to bring the horror of these amputations, these decapitations, the war, to the fore – to show how terrible and unfair this invasion of Iraq was. The whole thing is so grotesque. You see, the maypole is really something that would be associated with beauty – with beautiful young women in white gowns, dancing around, interweaving, and making designs with the maypole. But I completely turned it around, brutalized it, and brought it to life by making it three-dimensional. Well, there's still flatness to it, but you can see the front and the back in many cases.

What about your use of metal in the work? You've used so many perishable materials, like collage and very thin paper, so it's very interesting to see that here there's a more permanent material.

NS: That's true – it's much more permanent. At one point in the planning for Venice, there was talk of making a work for outdoors. Clearly I couldn't work with paper so we started exploring the idea of printing on aluminium. That's how it started.

It's also interesting because you've used metal before, but here you don't use the zinc sculpture engraving that you've used in the past for your ink stamps. Is there a link?

NS: There is, of course – I hadn't thought of that at all! Of course it's related – stamping out the words and even images. My God, thank you, you're absolutely right. There is that relationship.

You've used those ink stamps for a long time. When did you start with that?

NS: I started with those when I did the *Codex Artaud*. I bought these alphabets. I even commissioned one of the few wood carvers in Queens who still did that for a living to make some new alphabets because I didn't have full alphabets for a lot of what I wanted to print – you know, the quotes for the *Codex*. So that's how it got started in the studio, a long time ago.

In the 70s?

NS: Yes, the late 60s, early 70s. But I feel that that stuff is still as usable now as it was when I was working in olive oil. So that's how that happened. There was just this kind of transformation from the second dimension to the third. With the maypole, it's three-dimensional, and I didn't do it realistically in the sense that a lot of them are not life-size, and they're flat. I mean, it's just a flat sheet with decapitated heads painted on it.

OSCAR NIEMEYER

(with Norman Foster)

I first met Oscar Niemeyer with Stefano Boeri and Fernando Romero in Rio de Janeiro in 1999. I'd always wanted to meet him, but it started out very awkwardly. Niemeyer didn't want to speak in English or French, both of which I speak; he wanted to speak in Portuguese. I would ask a question and he'd answer in Portuguese, and then I'd ask another question without having any idea what he'd just said. So the second conversation here jumps around for this reason.

Many years later, I went to Brazil with Norman and Elena Foster. Norman Foster said he'd never met Niemeyer, and we managed to arrange a meeting and a three-way conversation.

One archive I have is of conversations with centenarians, which the artist Rosemarie Trockel encouraged me to do. Niemeyer was a hundred and three when he died, and we were lucky enough to meet and talk with him just a year before.

How to invent a city

NORMAN FOSTER: I saw the little church, the chapel in Pampulha, yesterday.

OSCAR NIEMEYER: Pampulha is very old, but it is not what it used to be. Many things have changed there and it has suffered many modifications.

NF: It was a very important building for me when I was twenty-one years old, before I started to study architecture ...

ON: It was my first project ...

NF: It was also the first influential project for me at the time. And I discovered it almost by accident yesterday because I was driving past by car and I couldn't believe it. I saw it on the way from the airport. And then this morning I saw the Ministry of Health and Education building [currently Gustavo Capanema Palace] for the first time.

ON: A lot of things have changed in Pampulha. The city was made in a hurry, the same as Brasília. Pampulha is very important for me because it was my first project. By the way, I am very pleased with your visit because I really appreciate your architecture.

NF: I would like to say how much I appreciated the Education building this morning and how I was surprised by some of the things that I saw.

ON: It was designed by Le Corbusier, we simply took charge of the development, but we changed many things. We changed a lot of things, we placed the building in the centre of the area, for example – but the original design was his.

NF: That I understood, but two things interested me which the publications cannot show. I thought it was a brilliant piece of city planning as well as [of] architecture. The short cut underneath and the urban space I thought

were brilliant, and the publications don't show that, it's only when you visit that you can appreciate it. But the other thing was that I have a feeling that the curves, the whole flowing curves did not come from Le Corbusier but they came from the translation of Le Corbusier's diagram, and that, in turn, then influenced Le Corbusier's work in the future. And again, that is something I think I discovered this morning.

ON: We changed many things, but the original design was his.

NF: Yes, yes, I see, but I thought it was more than a change: I felt it was a transformation, not just a modification, if you understand the difference. I thought it was perhaps more profound.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *We felt that afterwards the curve entered Le Corbusier's work more and more, so that actually Le Corbusier was really inspired by his experience in Brazil. And maybe it would be fantastic to hear a little bit more about the curve, because I remember when I did the first interview with you [in 2000], that you talked about the curve coming from the Brazilian landscape, coming from the mountains, coming from the rivers. Can you tell us more about that?*

ON: I think that architecture is invention. We can obtain the right result from a project, but to invent something is a different thing. Architecture cannot just be about designing a building that works well; it can also be beautiful, it can be different, it can be surprising, can't it? In fact, surprise is the main element in a work of art.

It is what Diaghilev, when working with Jean Cocteau, called the famous 'Étonnez-moi!' [Surprise-me!]. We were actually speaking earlier today about Diaghilev and the Ballet Russes, because I think they came to Rio also.

NF: I think we experienced some of that surprise in [the Contemporary Art Museum at] Niterói together.

ON: That brings architecture closer to a piece of art, doesn't it? Surprise is essential.

NF: I think the other thing is that the work with these flowing curves and the way the ramps interlock is impossible to appreciate two-dimensionally. That, I think, was the most exciting thing for me today.

ON: We tried to develop an advanced structure. We decided not to use small openings, but to have large open spaces that would give people more freedom.

And of all these many works, because you have done so many works, in terms of surprise, what is your favourite surprise, what is your favourite building of all your buildings?

ON: I don't know. A small work is Casa das Canoas; a big one is the School building. We are now going to a new school, a different building.

NF: We go there tomorrow.

ON: I just did a building in Avilés, Spain, with an auditorium, which has been very well received, because it was carried out very well.

Can you tell us more about this project in Spain?

ON: It is a large square; on one side it has an auditorium and on the other side a museum. People seem to appreciate the two buildings, with the empty spaces and the filled spaces that it creates. I have not seen the work yet, but they say it has been well received.

We have a magazine about architecture ...

NF: As somebody who has contributed so much to the city – I know that there are buildings that are not about the city, but so many of the buildings are about the city – I'd be very interested in any reflections on the city of the future and the directions in which cities might be moving.

ON: We have a great collaboration with our structural engineers. The current one is José Sussekund. He is a very intelligent young man and he allows us

to use concrete in all kinds of ways. We have a palace in Belo Horizonte that is suspended only on three pillars, so it is set away from the ground, but it works without breaking the logic of the architecture. That allows us to use the maximum of our possibilities.

NF: I drove past it yesterday. We saw it. We were very excited. Again, it was an amazing discovery by chance. It was suspended and the whole area under the building was completely free. It was wonderfully floating; it looked as though it was going to float away into the sky.

ON: Now we have all the options. In the old times, in the Renaissance, to make a dome you could not go higher than forty metres. Nowadays, you can go up to two hundred metres. We made a forty-metre-high dome [Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Centre] in Avilés in Spain, and it took them only ten days to build with the new system they have.

Norman also brought in the question of the city. We were actually discussing in the Engadin [Switzerland], on the 1st of January this year, about this idea to interview Oscar and have this conversation. There were so many reasons for this conversation, but one is that both Oscar and Norman have invented cities. Obviously, there is the example of Brasília, and then Norman invented Masdar, an ecological city for the twenty-first century.

ON: Brasília was developed by Lúcio Costa; I was in charge of the architecture. When people come to talk with me, usually architects, I emphasize in general the social aspect. I think that architecture is important, but life is more important.

NF: I was going to say that I find myself repeating the idea that the infrastructure, the public spaces, the connections, the urbanity ... are perhaps more important than the individual buildings. And those are the social spaces; those are the public spaces, the squares, the routes, the parks ... They perhaps bind the buildings together.

ON: In Brazil, young people read very little. That's why here, in the office, five years ago we started to teach about philosophy and the cosmos.

NF: I think that, in a way, what I enjoy about Oscar Niemeyer's work is that even the individual building is much about the public promenade, the public dimension, in a way which is almost like the city in miniature, which is about public spaces.

Last time we interviewed, Oscar Niemeyer told us that Brasília was not only a Utopia, but also a necessity. Norman said a similar thing when we did an interview about Masdar. Masdar was a necessity. So I think it would be nice, Norman, if you could tell us, and tell Oscar, about Masdar.

NF: Well, Masdar tries to learn from traditional spaces in the desert, and the way in which traditional buildings use shading, for example, and created quite narrow streets, and was very pedestrian-friendly and all of this was helpful to a sustainable future. Masdar tries to give priority, importance, to the pedestrian and puts the car below the pedestrian. It tries to learn from traditional buildings in the past which used shade, shaded streets, shaded openings ... And it is also about youth, because the first part is a university. So it's about young people finding ways to create renewable sources of energy; so it is about the future.

It would be very interesting to hear, if Oscar were to do Brasília again today, in what way would it be different? I know that he was more involved with the architecture than the planning, but it would be interesting to see, if he were planning the city today, what his approach would be ...

ON: I respect Brasília very much; it was done by a very competent Brazilian architect. But everyone has different ideas about certain things. I thought about changing the centre of the city a bit, to give the capital city a more monumental image. But they decided not to follow that idea and the Brasília that you studied is a simple, rational city. What do you think about the urbanism of Brasília?

NF: I'm seeing it on Sunday and I am greatly looking forward to going there. I love everything that I've seen of the architecture, I find it inspirational and I can't wait to see it in reality. A new city, I think it is always an interesting challenge. It's probably difficult [to give an opinion] until I see it myself. It's always an interesting challenge to create a city as a totally new entity. I think it is a great challenge.

Most cities grow organically, over many centuries, and it is very rare that there are instant cities, like Brasília and now your city.

NF: Although I suspect that Brasília has grown organically out from the heart.

ON: People like Brasília. It is rational, it keeps its aspect a bit urban. I think Brasília has a very good side. When it's finished, it's going to be a city of a certain importance. I always maintain that Brasília is not my work, but Lúcio's. He is a very talented architect and he put his heart and will into that project. It was made in a hurry; he presented the project in fifteen days. The city is welcoming, you go there and it's full of vegetation and life, a bit like Brazil, which is full of things, full of charm.

NF: What impresses me from the images that I have seen is the way that the architecture is able to create so many different identities. I think it is quite extraordinary that in a way the vocabulary of the architecture is able to create religious buildings, or a building about law ... I find that an extraordinary achievement.

ON: We did what we could, each with our own ideas. Brasília has a good side, it adapted itself to the location; Brazilians like Brasília. It is a place to stop, to rest. I think Brasília is fantastic. The forest, the hills ... This is a very nice country, isn't it?

NF: I have this image of these very generous spaces and the way in which the urban spaces then find public spaces within the buildings with the equivalent of colonnades ... but that I'll wait to see. The more I think about the work of the individual buildings, the more I realize the importance of

the public spaces that they create, like cities create public spaces. Walking the ramps [of the Contemporary Art Museum at Niterói] today was a great experience. So *before* you get into the building there's that wonderful ceremony ... And the ramps are almost like a dance in space, which enable you to see the building from different viewpoints before you actually enter it. And that, I find magic. Absolutely magic.

ON: That was my goal.

NF: It works wonderfully.

ON: The curves and the ramps offer beautiful solutions. Did you go to the Alvorada Palace? You will see the columns in which I inverted the regular form; they develop into a curve that creates distance in respect to the balcony. It's an example of how we can play with architecture without prejudice to its good functioning. The palace has no sills: just a set of curves and columns.

NF: I am greatly looking forward to it.

We have spoken about many different projects, but we haven't spoken about the current moment. I am very curious about what you, Oscar, have been working on today or over the last couple of days. If you could tell us a little bit [about] what you have been drawing and thinking ... ?

ON: I have a lot of work: buildings, sets of buildings ... I have just finished the project for Spain. People really liked the project: two buildings in a huge square, where it was easy to maintain the relationship between the filled and the empty spaces, as well as the relationship between both buildings. I am working on a very interesting project in Germany. They commissioned me to make a 'Modern House', which will not be built to live in it, but to attract attention to what a residence can be nowadays. The house came from my imagination, they told me to do whatever I wanted. I find it interesting, because it's a project that will influence the minds of the visitors.

And which is the most recent of all these new projects? The very most recent?

ON: That is a work on religion, on churches and temples that I built. I was amazed to see how many churches were there, twenty-three churches! Now I am working on a vast beautiful cathedral in Belo Horizonte. I am an atheist, but the challenge of a cathedral is so beautiful, so rich, that it allows you to use many ideas.

NF: And it's wonderful that you're going back to the place of your first commission, which was also a church.

ON: Yes, that's true. I have to build a chapel, a little church. When we were going to start the design, I decided we would plan it without a pencil, just in the imagination. So I pictured a really big cross and the architecture of the church would come out from the arms of the cross. It's beautiful and simple; religion is marked by the cross and the church emerges from it. We spent more time imagining the project than actually doing it. When I go to start a project, I already have an idea. We can imagine everything, even the interiors.

NF: It is beautiful because the cross becomes the architecture! It is interesting that a very small chapel and the vast cathedral are both also about the public space, which leads you to the interior.

ON: The idea is very simple; it is just based on the cross.

NF: They are both very urban projects.

ON: When I started working on the cathedral for Brasília, I thought I would make it round; then I stretched the columns and that was it! The problems of light and other things came later in the project. I can make more generous spaces, larger ones, they become higher with the ceiling, so I can vary the architecture more. We tend to want spans. You are going to Brasília, right? You will see the tower in concrete, a hundred and seventy metres high, which fits the city well. In the Palace of Alvorada, instead of doing vertical columns, I did curved ones. André Malraux was here and

said that the curves were really beautiful, like the Greek ones. Have you been in Greece? At the Parthenon? It has huge columns.

Do you have unrealized dreams? Do you have dream projects that you would like to realize?

ON: I would like to build a stadium, a completely different kind of stadium. I thought of doing one with a two-hundred-metre dome, from which the stands would emerge; it is an interesting subject. I would also like to create a mosque; with a completely different and delicate solution. Work is what gives pleasure to architecture, but sometimes it is hard. I spend so much time thinking, thinking about the project, about the problems, about the conditions for edification; architecture is fascinating. Foster's works that I have seen are beautiful. We are always learning!

NF: It's a wonderful passion to share. We are very fortunate.

Maybe the very last question could be the Rainer Maria Rilke question: what would be your advice to a young architect now?

ON: The most important thing is that architecture does not only have a functional aspect: it must be beautiful, it must be different, it must be surprising, for it to be a piece of art. Concrete allows us to do anything! I built a chapel for a friend, in the garden of his house. I worked with the light in such a way that, when it was finished, I was astonished! The building seemed to be floating! He was really excited to have such a chapel.

Can you tell us more about the architecture magazine – Revista Nosso Caminho?

ON: We are on our seventh number. Architecture in this case is just an excuse. What we want is to elevate the knowledge of young people. Young people don't read much and we want to inspire them to do it. Our magazine covers everything: literature, poetry, the cosmos ... It is a magazine that shares knowledge in a very generous way. This last work includes research on a comet that will pass very close to the earth. It has already passed once and now it will pass by here again; there is a certain expectation about it

amongst people that don't really know about this domain. The experts think it will not be a problem, but it is going to pass really close to us.

That is also something you both have in common, this transdisciplinary approach. Because I found this quote that Norman said, that 'architecture is an all-embracing discipline, not an art discipline'.

ON: When we leave from our class about the cosmos, we see the universe is such a fantastic thing that we feel very small. We want to know about our world, how it appeared; to know whether the Big Bang is a certainty. They are now building a Big Bang in Europe, to confirm the initial explosion. But it is hard to believe, we must wait for the result. However, it is a fantastic experiment. We are on board a fantastic ship! We think with a pencil. [*To NF*] We *both* play with the pencil, isn't it?

NF: Yes!

There could not be a more wonderful conclusion. Thank you very much.

New forms

ON: I always think architecture is a question of invention. You always need to do something different. You, have you been to Brasília yet?

STEFANO BOERI: Not yet.

ON: If you go, then take a good look at the building. You might have seen better things around the world, even more beautiful things, but you've never seen that same thing anywhere. We always sought new and different forms and tried to invent something new in architecture. And today I'd do it just the same, with that colonnade, all with a rhythm of different spans.

SB: You mean you want to startle the viewer.

ON: I'd recreate that same space, because the space is part of the structure. I'd make that colonnade different in its different parts with different

distances between the columns, now fifteen metres, now three metres, now nine metres. There's something musical about it. Think of the Mondadori building, that concrete space. Well, my client wanted me to make the spaces all the same, but I couldn't possibly have made them all symmetrical. I refused, and did what I wanted. This kind of approach enables the building to create a sense of surprise in the viewer.

SB: You had a lasting relationship with Giorgio Mondadori; he became a friend, didn't he?

ON: Yes, he became a friend, he has a lot of respect for me. The first time I saw Mondadori he showed me around his house and straight after took me to play soccer. He was a good person.

We were with Mendes da Rocha in his studio in São Paulo and we saw his [Niemeyer's] splendid house at Copa.

ON: I did that design forty years ago, when I did the whole pole of 'gerbera puera'. I did that dome, but I've never been inside, not even now they have renovated that space. It's an interesting space seen from outside. I know they inserted a mezzanine floor and created an open space around the dome. It's an alteration that I really liked when I saw it.

What was this pole meant to be originally?

ON: It was an exhibition space, originally; it was part of a centre with an auditorium and an exhibition area. But that's the way things get done in Brazil: they built just half of what was planned, they built the dome and not the auditorium, and so far the entrance has remained like that. You arrive and find a dome all on its own. What's more it's been closed for years.

Another thing about the Copa project: there are apartments of different sizes and so there is a range of social classes you don't generally find in the average building.

ON: It took courage to design a building like that at the time. I did the design and a friend of mine developed it. I like the curved façade. But all buildings

set on to the street can't have a character of their own – the street is too chaotic and too full of billboards. What we see is a part of the façade that's pleasant enough at times, but the rest is awful. Whether in Rio or in São Paulo or any other modern city, to see a good building you have to see the district it's set in. Most buildings are in bad taste. I don't get any pleasure out of designing apartment buildings or office blocks. If you look on my books of built architecture you'll see I do hardly anything but museums and theatres, things that I like and that enable me to find different kinds of solutions. I can't work up much interest in doing apartment buildings, even if they come out well, even if they prove to be enduring: these projects never give me much sense of fulfilment. The modern city is like that – take Paris, for instance. Back in the past they had already worked out a method: they didn't put up high buildings, they stuck to the same height for the eaves, for the buildings, the same proportions for the windows, and so the city has kept its character. It's not like that in Brazil, or in a lot of cities outside Brazil.

There's a blade-shaped building at Belo Horizonte.

ON: That's an apartment block, it doesn't interest me.

[The scene changes to the design area]

ON: When I do a project, any project, I think of the function and make form and function coincide. The two things are born together. The first project I did, that I acknowledge as mine, was the church of Pampulha. I wanted to create a lighter architecture than the kind of buildings you used to see in those days. I know I haven't influenced anyone. When I designed the church of Pampulha near Belo Horizonte, its architecture was radically different from anything they were doing in Brazil. If I had to say what influence I received from Le Corbusier, I'd say only that he gave me this advice: 'Architecture is invention.' When I designed Pampulha, my main concern was to use the curve. In fact I covered the church with curves! At Pampulha I wanted to do something lighter, it was my first project. To me

it's more important than Brasília. It was there I began to bring my architecture to life.

FERNANDO ROMERO: We've just visited the house at Canoas. Can you tell us something about how the project developed?

ON: You see, there was a piece of land that sloped downward. I wanted to immerse myself in nature. I put the bedrooms here [at the bottom] and above I put the living quarters. I protected them with a form like this [*draws a curving cantilever roof*], designed like this. Today it's still a modern house. If you visit it, it's already forty years old, but it's simple, there are no problems with it, it functions well. This house dates back to well before Brasília.

*This morning we saw the Niterói Museum and there were a lot of projects you were working on. [Describes the museum site]
There's a hundred metres between the site and the foundation.
Here there's the road, here a church and then another church.*

ON: The problem I had here was with the unity between the spaces. Here's there's the church with a dome suspended in the air, it measures forty metres, alone in mid-air, then there's another building here. Inside I want the walls all white; perhaps, whenever possible, a painting, a sculpture. I don't want to do architecture that advertises modern materials. I want to do architecture that explores the rapport between the different arts. I begin with the question of a building's function [*draws a big dome and divides it in half*]. In this building there's a stage two metres high, the parterre and points of access. There is nothing clearer than this: the form and the façade are rigorously suited to the programme and develop it clearly.

SB: If you think about it, you imagine the project by drawing it with this kind of approach.

ON: It varies, depending on the case. Once I was in Algeria, I had to do a mosque and I started thinking about the mosque, thinking about the way it ought to be, and I developed it in drawings. It was like this [*draws the*

profile of the mosque]. I decided the columns had to be here, then I did a footbridge like this. At other times I have to think for much longer. Recently I worked out a project that is now under construction: a big museum in Paraná. The design is interesting – I had already put up a building in Paraná forty years ago, a building like this [*draws a long stick building on pilotis*].

Where's this?

ON: In Paraná. It was all on its own, two hundred metres long, very beautiful, all enclosed. Illuminated from above. With the building designed for Paraná I decided I could do a museum. Just imagine that I have a building like this [*points to the stick building*], and here they asked me to design a museum, so I decided to lay out a big hall here [*referring to stick building*]. And the inhabitants of Paraná greatly appreciated this building, so I suspended the museum here [*draws a mushroom next to the stick building*]. The links are here [*pointing to the base of the mushroom*]. I set a large museum hall here. When this building will be ready, you'll think that these two buildings were erected at the same time. Because in this building, that's forty years old, the space between the columns is sixty metres and thirty metres. If the structural engineer were to rework calculations for this building today, he would do it like this, with the same boldness we displayed forty years ago. It's an absolutely modern building. [*Shows the photo of the model*]

Here's the old building, absolutely modern. The spans are twenty metres, sixty metres, thirty metres. The other one that's going to be built will be eighty metres high and will stand on its own, to highlight the presence of the modern, because a museum has to have the air of being a museum, and it really does, it has the look of a museum. And that's the way it ought to be. Instead there are a lot of museums, even in New York, that you can walk right past and unless they've got 'museum' written across them you won't understand what they are. Ah, no – a museum has to give you the idea it really is a museum.

Is this museum very important in your current output?

ON: Museums can be very different. How it functions depends on various factors. The Genita Rocha Museum was easy to do. It needed a support here [*draws it*], I designed this support and – hey presto! – the architecture sprang into existence. I couldn't conceal the landscape. To defend the landscape I raised the architecture higher, leaving the eye free to gaze out at the landscape. Everything in architecture has an explanation. The museum was like this, round: I put in a ramp, then another. I added the rooms.

SB: Your drawing is a synthesis. Often a drawing of the elevation; it's difficult to make out the plan in your drawings.

ON: The architect has to study and understand the plan when it's the right moment. He has to feel the space, to see it as a volume. That was the concept in this museum, the terrain was like that. I had to protect the landscape.

What are you working on now?

ON: A new building that only has one central point of support, it soars in the air alone. It's the Attorney General's office in Brasília. It has a central supporting pillar, it's suspended by bracing at the top. It's a public building and I believe a public building should awaken surprise in the viewer, show that technology is evolving, principally for the public's sake. Yes, because the public doesn't benefit from anything in Brazil. They need to be able to stop and admire it, be surprised at all this. The building's nearly finished.

SB: When you get a commission for a project, do you begin with a sketch? A formal idea?

ON: First I have to think. And then I start drawing, I seek the form. I try to use concrete in all the forms it allows, as far as it's possible, as far as I can go. We use technology not as a function of the buildings that stand next to ours, but to think of the whole of the surrounding space, so as not to destroy but enhance it.

SB: The idea of concrete, it's the idea of a common language.

ON: I think each architect has to have his own architecture. I do mine, modestly; I do what I like quite freely. And I don't set much store by architecture as a discipline. I've spent my life at the drawing board, but what's important in the world is not architecture, it's helping people to struggle for a better world: to help the poor, this is truly important. Architecture is a pastime. You don't change anything with architecture!

SB: Is your relationship with politics still important? What kind of relationship exists between architecture and politics?

ON: I'd just finished being interviewed, before you arrived. And since I used to be in exile in France, during the dictatorship, they asked me what I thought of politics and de Gaulle. Because when I came to France, de Gaulle issued a decree that allowed me and others to work as architects here. So they asked me what I thought of politics and de Gaulle. I replied that politics is important, even more so now in the middle of this filthy shambles no one protests about.

ON: Le Corbusier wasn't important, but Fidel Castro was important.

I saw your exhibition in Paris. There are numerous sculptures and political monuments that you did. You have always kept up a dialogue with artists, with writers, with other art forms. What is the role of your relationship with the various different art forms?

ON: Not so long ago I instituted a course of architecture in Rio de Janeiro. When I talk to the students I always tell them it's not sufficient to finish the school and be, let's say, great architects. It's important to finish and be men who know life, who know about the world's problems, about poverty. And they have to be ready and able to open up to life. This course we set up lasts two months. It's a course in architecture but in parallel with it we organized lectures on literature, philosophy, history. In fact we architects need to have a general idea about what's happening in the world. The architect has to be able to read, to write. For instance, if I work on a project, when I feel it's ready, I write a text, but if I run out of ideas I go back to the drawing board,

because my works are accepted and understood more for the texts that accompany them than for the architecture in itself. Nobody understands architecture. If you go into the Ministry of Health and Education building you'll see a room where there's a big window looking out on to an interior. No one realizes it, but when the son of Nervi – a great Italian engineer – came, he stopped just there and said he was working on a bridge one kilometre long in Italy that uses a similar system. These are the richly mysterious subtleties of architecture that no one understands.

In my firm, everyone has to know about philosophy. We have to know that the cosmos was made first. Man is certainly no less important and has no less of an evolutionary history than the cosmos.

On the question of the interdisciplinary approach: in your history there's an ever-present dialogue between the various disciplines of art alongside architecture. Is this deliberate or just accidental?

ON: I owe my formation in part to the intellectuals who were my friends. I was active in the Communist Party, my friends called on me to discuss the usual problems, we protested ...

Tell us how you came to design Brasília.

ON: I was working on Le Corbusier's project for the Education Ministry. Capanema, who was minister at the time, asked my colleague Carlos to design a university, and he told me to start working on a design for a hospital. But the project director was meant to be Sousa Campos, who was really good. One day he arrived, looked at the designs and asked, 'What's this?' It was a hospital, but different from what you might normally think of as a hospital. We argued about it at length and I offered to resign. But he wouldn't accept my resignation. He called me into his office. I was worried but I was ready to argue with him. Everything ended well; we remained close friends till his death.

But when the idea of constructing Brasília came up, it was Capanema who recommended me as a possible architect. If I hadn't argued, resigned, if Sousa Campos hadn't turned down my resignation, if we hadn't remained

friends ... then we wouldn't have done Pampulha. That's life, it's full of the unexpected; we never know what's going to happen.

The question of Pampulha is important. It grew out of a dialogue with the politician who later became president. And Pampulha was the forerunner of Brasília.

ON: I've already said as much. Pampulha was the start of Brasília. The same problems of engineering, the same technical problems that later multiplied in Brasília. It was the same thing, only Brasília was on a different, much bigger scale. Brasília was an adventure at the end of the world. There were no contacts, there wasn't a road, there wasn't anything at all. It was an important thing for the country, undertaken with a certain optimism. Building a city in four years isn't easy. We had to construct buildings, streets, squares, a whole city, in short. The impression it gave was we could do pretty well anything in Brazil.

There's another thread running through the autobiography, the journeys ...

ON: I've always travelled in a group. I would stop, joke, call out to people. I once did a trip that you can't even imagine. I was in Rome and I had to go to Algeria. I had to take the train, the baggage was already stowed away on board, I saw all the confusion, it was full of people talking. I decided not to catch that train, but how could I get to Algeria? I went to a car-hire firm, but they only rented them for the weekend. I rented one and drove all the way to Algeria: I drove right through Italy, Morocco, and worked three months in Algeria. It was only three months later that I remembered the car had been hired for the weekend. We arrived back in Paris thinking they would have arrested us. I stayed at the hotel while my nephew went and returned the car. At the car-hire company they said the insurance company had already paid over the money. In short, I did all this quite calmly. To amuse myself and be in company – naturally I was willing to pay for everything. These are the really enjoyable things.

SB: Concrete lends itself to modern architecture, or perhaps it lends itself to a certain kind of regionalism, to the history of the modern city in Brazil and South America, because you have a rare skill in using it.

ON: I'm not interested in talking about Brazilian architecture or French. Once it was easier to keep architecture more uniform. Today it's different. One day Alvar Aalto said there is no such thing as ancient architecture and modern, there's only good architecture and bad. And I agree. Bad architecture: Mies van der Rohe. French architecture: Le Corbusier. That's how it is. Each architect does his own architecture. I like reinforced concrete. There's no need to think about the past. If you have a space like this [*sketches a big dome*], for example, the museum I'm doing in Brasília: it's a dome measuring eighty metres. It has a ramp that rises like this and projects thirty metres, linking one floor to the next, creating the connection, a cantilever roof, with windows running all around it. And you see the dome, the reinforced concrete. Back in the Italian Renaissance they were all taken up with the Greek column: they used to discuss how to design a capital, they arrived at a point where they almost thought they could do architecture as in the days of the ancient Romans.

What is important about the Italian Renaissance is the union between the different arts.

ON: Architecture has no influence at all. The day the world is better we'll have different and bigger problems than at present, more important ones. And people will deal with those problems directly. Do you think we've ever been through worse times than the present? The world has got darker, hasn't it? Architecture doesn't change the world; it only changes the street. As they used to say during the French Revolution: things are going badly, but the values of equality, liberty and fraternity remain and are spreading.

Can you tell me more about the organic, the body? Is there maybe a parallel with your curve?

ON: I believe in invention. A child of ten can do a beautiful drawing, and when he sees the paintings of the great artists fall facilely into the perverse

game of repetition and lose their powers of invention, becoming monotonous. You have to resist this. For example, I have a lot of books about my architecture. But I don't read them. I don't despise them, but I want to do something else. I like the Egyptians, who had no ideas but had an innate sense of monumentality. Once Le Corbusier told me he wasn't afraid of monumentality.

*Your work as a writer coincides with your architectural work.
You've designed a lot but you've also produced numerous
theoretical writings.*

ON: I really like writing. It's a pastime. The architect's profession is demanding, there are a thousand problems ... crazy. I like Jorge Amado, he writes books, a fantastic person, very surrealist. I really like a Portuguese writer called [José] Saramago, he's really good too. He's a great writer. He had lunch with me, he showed the photos of the island where he lives and his house. He's important.

Arafat's important too, he takes up a position, he says what he thinks clearly. I've known a lot of people in my life. I know what people are like; I no longer get surprised. I knew Sartre, he was formidable; I met him in Paris during a protest march. I remember Paris when we all mixed with the intellectuals, my friends, in exile, thinking of our friends being tortured.

I'm going to do a monument [*turns and points to a drawing of a kind of obelisk*]. It's a monument twenty-five metres high. It will have an inscription: 'The land is ours.' Land is important for Brazil. [*Indicating a drawing for a mural thirty metres long for one of his buildings: the Niterói Foundation*] The drawing speaks of the land, the struggle for the conquest of the land. The peoples who do not have a land of their own and are fighting to have one. It should go to Paris.

Have you ever met Mexican architect, Luis Barragán?

ON: No, I've never met him, just read his books. His buildings were pink: he was very good; I have no problems with my colleagues.

SB: Are there contemporary architects that interest you in particular?

ON: Yes, but I won't mention their names, not even the Brazilians.

PHILIPPE PARRENO

It all started in the 1990s at the Villa Arson, the art centre in Nice, where Philippe Parreno was in residence, and I saw his work for the first time. But he didn't want to meet me as he was living like a hermit and spending all his time reading and writing, so we only actually met at the end of the decade when I was curating an exhibition of his for the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, where I was curator at the time. Parreno is a collaborative artist (he has been since his student days) and he likes to place emphasis on dialogue and working practices. In this Paris exhibition, which was dedicated to Rauschenberg, we did a big project together with the scientist and inventor Jaron Lanier on virtual reality and cephalopods. We've travelled together a lot, co-curating as well as seeing shows, and what follows is a small part of our total conversations. We've always recorded them, whether on a plane to Istanbul, walking in the park, travelling in Ireland, or walking in the Swiss mountains, though perhaps the most regular place is the Café de Flore in Paris.

A great Utopia

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *Last time we spoke you said that the Conversations publication should take a different form.*

PHILIPPE PARRENO: Yes, it should be presented differently. You've been able to publish it in a straightforward way, but you could present it as a great novel – I think you're a great novelist! Not in the sense of creating fictional characters to depict the real world, such as Flaubert and all those writers used to do, but rather doing it the other way round – taking real characters and depicting an imaginary world. Going through these discussions you depict a great Utopia.

And you mentioned Don DeLillo.

PP: Yes, it would be great to ask him to write the preface for the 'novel'. I was thinking of the way in which Jaron [Lanier] described his inventions and virtual reality, and how he was interested in defining a post-symbolic way of communication: instead of using a sign to talk about the thing it represents, to take the thing itself. And with François [Roche], the first thing we did was to produce a message that isn't a word or a text, but a building. We keep on putting things on the table in order to extend the discussion. The conversation could be based on pictures or objects instead of using words. Imagine a room where people are having a serious discussion but without using any words, just by throwing things at each other: monkeys, spaniels or pots ...

One idea was that you were to make a film and then – before designing a building – the architect would watch this film instead of doing a site visit. You also had the idea of a soundtrack or of somebody speaking.

PP: Yes, I think that would be nice.

It's like maintaining the exhibition format, which is probably more of a problem than the object itself. Most of the artists have this notion of what it is to exhibit, how to articulate something within a space.

We had a discussion a few days ago with Mathias [Augustyniak]. He also wanted to work in that direction. There are a few tracks, and with Dominique [Gonzalez-Foerster] we wanted to buy the rights of these books – the Gap series. It could be nice to produce six episodes made by different people. It would be almost like having six 'plateaux'. It could start with 'The True Story', which is the title of the first novel, and continue with 'The Forbidden Knowledge'.

In terms of the Gap series, it seems so incredibly complex, it's almost impossible to make a movie out of it.

PP: There's a lot of detail in it. Everything is based on language and taking pleasure in describing scenes and situations. That's the way it works. 'I never saw anybody who was able to open the book and close it before the end' – our friend Bruce Sterling says this about the Gap series. There's a magnetic element. It makes you read it quicker and it can be quite addictive. In a way it's slightly like [Stanislaw] Lem's books.

And it's dark, really dark. It's like a great chess game.

Language and desire

You are working simultaneously on different projects: a new venture shaped as a feature film and a series of shows acting as a retrospective.

PP: With *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* [2006], Douglas [Gordon] and I made the portrait of a man in real time. This new project could be presented as another portrait – of an illegal immigrant. The film tells the story of a fictional character that becomes, at the end of the film, a citizen.

The film is set in New York City. How will it reflect the city's identity? Metropolis is New York in the daytime; Gotham City is New York at night.

PP: All the signs produced by the city are becoming threatening to the boy. The city starts to speak to him. This test screen was shot in Chinatown with the Chinese illegal immigrant community.

So it becomes the portrait of a city.

PP: Yes, it could become at the end the portrait of a city. And the story of the film could become a map – a map through the signs that the city produces on an infinite number of levels. Chinatown is a city within a city. So like in *Alice in Wonderland*, it's the role of paranoia on perception.

I see several models for your forthcoming series of shows – Zurich, Paris, Dublin, New York, etc.

PP: I didn't want to conform to the specific genre of the 'mid-career travelling retrospective show'. The three places in question are quite different from each other, just like the nature of the relationships I have with the directors of these institutions. And so I'm working on a very different exhibition for each space. In Zurich, the Kunsthalle has a sequence of rooms, so we play with the doorways of these rooms, setting up an awning over each entrance and exit. Awnings like the marquee set up in front of the Guggenheim for 'theanyspacewhatever' show. These awnings are in the same spirit as the bright plaques I'd played with earlier. No object is ever exhibited in a museum without its accompanying plaque and language. The awnings in this case are outgrowths; they invade the exhibition space. Like the body-snatchers, they replace the object they are supposed to name. They are empty and hollow, ghostlike. In the first room, there are ventriloquist's dummies which I made with Rirkrit Tiravanija, ventriloquist's dummies of every artist with whom I have collaborated in the past. There are also the *Speech Bubbles* [1997] I exhibited at the Venice Biennale, and *Speaking to the Penguins* [2007], an infrared photograph. So language and sound are present, but the exhibition itself is silent.

What is the score you are writing for the exhibition in Paris?

PP: In Paris, the architecture of the Centre Pompidou is made up of superimposed platforms. I wanted to rediscover this platform architecture. I built no walls at all, but rather got rid of the filters that covered them and opened the space on to the street, on to the Tinguely/Saint-Phalle fountain. Thus the first act of this restoration is to offer, in lieu of a retrospective, a journey through time. January 31, 1977 is the date of the Centre Pompidou's opening, the space that I have enlarged. The show here is like a retrospective and a journey in time through dates and objects and images. A large red moquette emphasizes the open space. There is a sixteen-feet-four-inches-by-forty-feet screen, on which a seventy-millimetre [film] is projected. The projection room is visible, looking like an outgrowth of picture-windows, connected to a ventilation system of the Pompidou. Curtains rise and fall. When the curtains are open, you are in the street, and microphones installed outside pick up the sound of the pavement and the street and convey it inside.

The film projected is called *1968* [2009]; it's about seven minutes long and is a bit similar to what I did in *Credits* [1999], which was the reconstitution of an urban landscape of the 1970s. Here it's the reconstitution of an event of the late 60s. After the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968, his body was put on a train to be taken from New York to Washington. All along the way, people – most of them workers or middle class: the people, in other words – gathered beside the railway to pay their lasts respects to him. It's a particular moment along a railway. These characters lined up along the side are like the living dead. And this forgotten news, filmed and projected in seventy millimetres comes back to haunt us. It's an image as real as the visitor at the exhibition or the person one sees strolling by when the curtains are raised.

For Bard College I would like to re-enact *Snow Dancing* [1995]. Do you remember *Snow Dancing*? It's a book that recounts a promotional party. Some people in a space celebrate something, but we don't know what. It was structured like a theatre play describing a party that lasted for an hour

and thirty minutes. And it takes about an hour and thirty minutes to read the book. We played the party for about the same time. The show opened when the party was over. The party produced an exhibition. I would like to reconstruct this space and re-enact the party in it. It's what I'm working on now. But that could change. The Dublin show I have not decided on yet.

Can you talk more about the exhibition as a medium or, as Alexander Dorner said, 'Ways Beyond Objects'?

PP: There is no object without its exhibition. Everything set off, in a way, from that precise statement and, from then on, you can add to that ... I am doomed, meaning that the next project is always more interesting than the last one. I guess I'm always a bit scared of becoming a subject. Those retrospectives make you a subject, even a hysterical subject, don't you think? Remember that statement by Pierre Boulez: 'Is the work, such as we know it, a veritable whole, or is it not instead the time-limited fragment of a vaster, unfinished project, without which, however, this fragment could never have existed, and given the illusion of the whole?'

What are you reading at the moment?

PP: Right now, I like to read books about magic – white magic but also illusionism. I am serious. Magic used to be referred to as 'the art'. As Alan Moore said, art is like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words or images to achieve changes of consciousness.

It has been two years since you and I co-curated the opera Il Tempo del Postino [July 2007]. Looking back at it – now that we are going to present it again in Basel – it has a strange significance: it was both a celebration of something we've been doing for a very long time and also an end to a chapter – and a new beginning.

PP: I still like this project a lot because, in many ways, it summarized a lot of our ideas about exhibition as a coherent object, about time-based object,

object without boundaries, about group show as a collective ... But it also has to do with desire, and the articulation of desires.

Il Tempo del Postino is dedicated to our friend the late English architect Cedric Price, who has been one of architecture's most influential figures since the founding of his office in London in 1960. None of the artists invited to be in this show had been born when he started working on the Fun Palace [1960–74], a transdisciplinary multi-purpose complex for theatre and cultural projects. An event like Il Tempo del Postino would have been hosted in such a structure. His focus on time-based buildings that would disappear after a limited lifespan, rather than on finished buildings, made him legendary. He was convinced that buildings should be flexible enough to allow the occupier to adapt the building to serve the needs of the moment. This reflects his belief that time is the fourth dimension of design. The Fun Palace was supposed to be a flexible structure in a large mechanistic shipyard on which, depending on changing situations, many structures could be built from above. 'It will probably look like nothing on earth from the outside,' it was said.

PP: *Il Tempo del Postino* is a time-based exhibition. Artists had been invited to propose an art piece, a tableau, so to speak, that will be visible only for a limited moment. It is a collection of time-based works. We can see *Il Tempo del Postino* as an experiment in time-coding. In *Futurological Congress* [1971] Stanislaw Lem writes about the future: 'It is a peripatetic vision of knowledge formation in which global constituencies converge and disperse, at once sharing information and developing new models of post-symbolic communication.' *Il Tempo del Postino* is the Italian translation of 'Postman's Time'. 'Postman' means two different things in French: *facteur* is 'factor', like for a mathematical operation or a computer language programming, but 'factor' also means 'postman'. And a postman is a person who delivers information. So here we go. This is a proposal to visit an exhibition space without moving – a journey through a museum without

moving. Each of the artists appear next to each other, rather than with each other, according to an old idea of time-sharing, but they nevertheless still constitute a subject – raising once more the question of the collective, a polyphony of voices as one subject.

What if?

Everything in this show is a world premiere, but it grew out of a whole series of exhibitions, at the Kunsthalle Zürich, the Centre Pompidou and the Serpentine Gallery. Each show somehow had a different approach to the idea of a retrospective so I wondered if you could talk a little bit about these previous incarnations.

PP: One of the reasons I like to do shows is that I really hate to do what we are doing now, which is to talk to a large group of people, I prefer to do that with exhibitions. I think this series of middle-age retrospective shows really stopped at the Serpentine, and this one will be a final chapter of it. At the Serpentine what I did was to find a way for an image to appear in a space and a way for the visitors to be guided, without any script, to go from one image to another. I believe that the show at Beyeler is a final choreography, so to speak.

In general I think that the thing which is true for the Serpentine show, for many of your previous shows, and certainly true of your show here, is the idea that the exhibition is a score; it has a lot to do with the way it unfolds in time.

[Dog starts barking]

PP: That's part of the soundtrack. *[Laughter]*

The barking dog is also relevant to how the show blurs inside and outside. During the Serpentine show, a part of this score was when it suddenly started to snow outside, and here the show is even more porous, it takes place both inside and outside.

PP: I guess I can start from the way I worked on these shows; it's now two years since I started the process. The first work that I thought about doing was working out how to establish a link between an image and its subject – between an image and a real dimension of reality. I had already made an attempt years ago, when I did a project called *The Boy from Mars* [2003] with François Roche, the architect. It was basically an attempt to build an architecture produced by film; the film would produce its own reality. And I wanted to go further than that, and further than that was this idea that an image can produce life, which is what I tried to do – to produce life by making a film. And to go further than that is to see how life can survive its creator. It's not unlike the story of Frankenstein.

This is going to be a long answer, Hans! [*Laughs*]

So I started with this idea of an image linked to the living. I went to a bar once and got drunk with a friend of mine, Bas Smets, a landscape architect, and we started talking about landscape architecture, and I thought maybe a film can produce a landscape, and the landscape in reversal can produce the film. So we started to have this conversation about where to create this landscape. And then the Daimler Foundation came to me to commission a new work, and I said, well, 'Good idea', and then Fondation Beyeler was interested in that work, and then eventually I was found a piece of land given to me by a friend of mine in Portugal, so everything was set up to start working on this 'beast'.

So, OK, an image or film to produce life. I decided to work on 'what if?' scenarios, and that was a good part of the research. With Bas Smets, we tried to establish a way to create a garden that would only be produced by the movement of the camera, so travelling through it becomes a pass, a close-up becomes a topiary, and so forth. We ended up designing a sort of weird topographic landscape that you would only be able to see through the point of view of a camera – it's not so far from Renaissance painting where you have anamorphosis.

So we now had this landscape that can only be seen from the precise point of view of the camera. That is the film which is now showing in museums, and that film will have soon its own history. What is interesting

in that was that the film project produced something which the film rejects: this weird piece of shit that lives in Portugal, that will live for another forty years. A plant will grow according to its own will, not to my will. To be even more abstract, there's a funny line from Georges Bataille, who said there are some things the mind produces that the mind won't want to recognize. So the capitalist rejects the proletarian, and so forth; there's always a rejection to an action. So what is the rejection from an art form? That will be that suspended life.

That obviously leads us back to this production of reality. You've talked about this garden, but I wanted to ask you about the title: CHZ, Continuously Habitable Zones. The other day I spoke to Dimitar Sasselov, the great astronomer, who says, assuming that in a hundred or two hundred years life will no longer be possible for human beings on planet earth, it starts to be absolutely essential to find these extra-solar stars where human life could be possible. It seems to me that you have also been thinking about this idea of potential life conditions on other planets, so I wondered if you could talk a little bit about this title.

PP: It came from an astrophysicist's research. We were looking for life in similar situations to earth; lit by a big sun, like our sun, when in fact life is possible – or at least photosynthesis is possible – with what they call dwarf suns. It gave the title to the film, and it sounds science fiction enough to be good to me, because the idea of an image producing reality, the image had to be in my head, or in my imagination, sort of like a meta-image – the image of an image. And this black garden being like a weird planet sounded really cool to me. So, yes, that was the title.

I would like to talk about the Marilyn film [2012], the soundtrack of which has been with us throughout the talk. I was wondering what prompted the beginning of this work, what was the trigger for it?

PP: I received a book from a friend of mine about the notes that were found in a notebook, and I was really touched by those words. I'd never thought about Marilyn before but after completing the film *CHZ*, which was really about an image producing life, I thought it would be interesting to go to the other side and explore the idea that an image can also suppress life. I wanted to talk about death and dying, I guess, and as [Jean-]François Lyotard said in interviews in the 80s, it was the first time in history that we saw really clearly that unconsciousness could kill, as if we didn't know that before. Marilyn was killed by her own image and I was interested in developing that idea. So on the one hand I had an image producing life, and on the other hand I had an image suppressing life. I thought it was a good dialectic.

I started working on that and the idea of this portrait was that it was not to be a portrait really of her, but a portrait of this image, 'the murderer', as they would say in the Philip K. Dick book – the image which killed.

And I decided to engage in this process pretty much like they would do in nineteenth-century phantasmagoria: a priest would go on stage and talk to the audience, and summon a dead person through a projection of light on smoke, and there would be a ventriloquist, and the dead person would speak. That sort of circus act was very popular in the nineteenth century. And I thought on the one hand I had this beast that comes to bury down in the museum, next I want to bring forth this angel, and it will be like a circus act. Beauty and the Beast.

So *Marilyn* started like that, as a way to make a film as a spiritualist session – how can I simulate life, how can I trick the audience? And there were three ways to do it, they call it biometry: through eye recognition, voice recognition and signature. Strangely enough we can now, as I did, simulate or reconstruct the voice of Marilyn and her handwriting. Her eye would be the point of view of the camera. I used all three, so I had to develop software for the handwriting and this robot, and I tried to trick the audience like that, as the preacher was doing in the nineteenth century. And at the end we revealed the trick.

It's also part of your ongoing investigation into portraiture; you did the portrait of Zidane with Douglas Gordon, in the Serpentine show there was again this preoccupation with portrait, and it's been there for many, many years.

PP: Yes, I did a lot of portraits, even *CHZ* is a portrait: somehow the same terminology of portraiture came only when we worked with Douglas on *Zidane*, because before shooting we went to the Prado to look at portraits. The simple idea to propose to the audience to look only at one face for one hour and a half was definitely something to do with portraiture. I never even looked at my mother for an hour and a half. Honestly, I'd never been really interested by portraits before but I realized that somehow it was the leitmotif in my practice, and *Zidane* was the first time I realized that I was in fact obsessed by that.

I always believed I was not an artist, and strangely enough I had to go all the way around in order to realize that in fact I was an artist, just one who was interested in portraiture. It's kind of pathetic, but it took me thirty years to realize that.

And what about Invisibleboy, that's another form of portraiture, no?

PP: Yes, there was *Invisibleboy* [2010], a portrait of an illegal Chinese man in New York; Annlee, a Japanese manga character; *June 8, 1968* was also a portrait of Robert Kennedy, so, yes, there are a lot of them.

And will there be any more?

PP: I think that this film, *Marilyn*, will be the last one that I will do in the context of an exhibition, I believe so, yes.

Do you want to go through the *parcours* [development] of the show, maybe, would that be interesting?

Yes, I think it would be nice.

PP: As you know, we are now in this corridor and we are listening to the soundtrack of *Marilyn*, with the rain or water of the river, filtering out of the

space. I tried to find a way to display these two films [*Marilyn* and *CHZ*] in an exhibition space, and I always believe that an exhibition is successful when it seems that the work you present has always been there.

So I tried to find a way to integrate them within the space. I found these two rooms down here in the museum and I started thinking in terms of automaton, you know, they would be like the body and the soul, and I had to try to find a way for the automaton to walk through the show, move through the space. So we came up with the idea of the marquees outside, and then I thought, 'OK, so what is happening when you are not looking at Marilyn's film but you stay in the *CHZ* room?' and I started to mix the sound that you perceive, not looking at the image but being next to the image. And then we went through the corridor to the winter garden here in the marquee and again started to mix the sounds that come out of the rooms. You will not be looking at the pictures but you will be sitting outside of the exhibition space. Then when you go further up, there is the pond with the water lilies moving according to the soundtrack of the film, so when you leave the museum you still have a relation to the picture. Then you can take away a DVD and take it home and that will be another experience of the image. So I believe that in the end the show or the exhibition is the sum of all this relative distance from an image – you can be next to it, in front of it, far away from it, and yet you can still have a relation to it. Does that make sense?

Yes, totally. Talking about the DVD, there is another thing which is very strange. When one plays it, one has a great sense of familiarity, because one has just seen the film, but there is a strange double-take moment. Something is different, and it takes a little while to work out what it is but obviously what is different is the soundtrack, there's this shift in the soundtrack. I was wondering if you could talk about this.

PP: It's all about trying to provide a different experience towards an image. So of course, when you play the DVD, it is not the same, you don't hear the voice of Marilyn, but the soundtrack for both films that you have on the

DVD were done by my friend Arto Lindsay and it's the same thing, it's another way to affect the memory that you may have of an image or exhibition. You watch those DVDs at home, and you might even forget the first relation you had with it, as if in a way the image starts to be alive, and the way for an image to be alive is to get through you and haunt you. For example, we feel empathy because this image of Marilyn was sad, so even sadness could be part of the choreography because you take that away with you, you carry this empathy or this sadness with you but you also carry this DVD with you. One is an emotion and one is a technical object but they are also effects of the exhibition, or part of the choreography of the show.

And last but not least, you mentioned already very briefly the water lilies that are outside in the pond. The water lilies, you said, are connected to the soundtrack: they only function when the films are on, so during opening hours they pop up in the ponds outside. I suppose that idea was triggered when you visited here and saw the Monets, can you tell us a bit about the genesis of that piece?

PP: Yes it was to go back to the first film that I wanted to display, *CHZ*. The soundtrack, if you see the film, is going through infrabass; the reason why is because we didn't record the sound of this film by using air as a way to conduct the sound but by using the earth. We plugged a microphone into the earth, using a contact microphone and a seismograph, in order for the sound to be perceived through the body and not through your ear. I wanted to try to find a way for this sound from the beast to leak out of the museum, and so you can hear them now, the infrabass coming through the structure, shaking the marquee. How can that still come out, and try to find its way out of the show, as if art tries to find a way through and out of the frame of interpretation? So then came the idea of the pond reflecting the soundtrack of the film.

And ghosts are all over the place. I mean, not only is the ghost issue so present in the Marilyn film, but it has also got to do with the pond – the ghosts of the film migrate.

PP: You're hearing the sound now coming out from the space, yeah.

We've talked about ghosts many times before, and ghosts have appeared in your earlier work; for example, you made these glowing posters where you would have a sort of a ghost presence. You once said in an interview: 'These pictures reappear like ghosts. It's not that they can't survive their representation; it's more that they just don't want to die; they have not accomplished their task. Must they be treated, destroyed or incarnated? "Ghostbusters" !"

So I thought maybe we should talk about ghosts a little bit more.

PP: I think ghosts were a metaphor I used just to say something which seems to be so obvious – but maybe sometimes it's interesting to repeat obvious things – which is that for me of course there is no art without exhibition. And then when I was young – younger [laughs] – with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, with Rirkrit Tiravanija, with a lot of artists from my generation, for us it was so obvious that we even passed by the object to go directly to the exhibition without objects, but with projects, so we replace the object by the project and figure out that was a cool way to produce art. I still believe that to do an exhibition is an act of creation, only to me it was so obvious that without exhibitions, there is no art object. You know, you can store them in a museum for years but there is a moment for them to come out, and then you have to readdress it. So either they carry their own score, or you have to place the score on them. You can be helped by history, but in a way either things die or have to be reinvented.

And that calls to mind the way you use exhibitions as a medium in all these shows we've talked about today, particularly in the show here at the Beyeler, and leads us also to your next project, which is in Philadelphia at the Philadelphia Museum. This has a connection to Marcel Duchamp and is a project curated by

Carlos Basualdo, where you actually will be involved with a kind of display feature.

PP: Well, Philadelphia – I was asked by Carlos Basualdo to ... not to curate, but I would say ... there is no word for that, I have to use a French word – make some *mise en scène* of a show. It's a really cool show called 'Dancing around the Bride' and it's a precise moment in the 50s and 60s in the United States, which is a really sensitive subject for me, when a group of artists – among them were Duchamp, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Merce Cunningham – who were for a while really challenging, really freely, thought and ideas and motifs, and one motif would appear in the work of one artist without the notion of copyright, and things were circulating and moving, and the fact that for me as a student it was the most fantastic waltz ever. That was the moment when you decide to become an artist, to be into this dance, this ballroom.

So Carlos asked me to do the *mise en scène* around this for the show, so I'm not actually going to produce any works but I'm going to see how I can recreate a sense of life with all these forms that have been produced for twenty years. I'm going to work with the dancers of Merce Cunningham, and I'm going to work with pianists playing John Cage. I'm going to work with light going in and out, and try to set up a sub-score to the score which was written by this friendship that was a momentum in art, at least for my standard.

My only recurrent question, which I've asked you many times before, is the question about your unrealized projects. The projects which have been too big to be realized, dreams or Utopias.

PP: This is the moment when people try to think really hard to be really smart.

We were supposed to make a *Postman*['s] *Time II* – that's unrealized. There we go.

*Tony Bennett said, 'Give me a museum and I will change society.'
So my question to you is: if you had an idea of how such an
institution could function, what would be your musée imaginaire,
your imaginary institution, of the twenty-first century?*

PP: Well, we have had a couple of conversations around that topic, but it's just such a long journey. How can I answer that ... ?

I know that I, for example, really grew up with art centres rather than with museums. In Grenoble I guess the guys from the 60s – you know, the cool guys – were more inclined to bring kids to art centres or theatres and the live performances were the places where things were highly debated. I grew up far away from museums, so art centres were the key; the Magasin Grenoble had a huge influence on me. And I do believe that these places, even more than art schools, can produce artists. Like cinema produces movie-makers, art centres produce artists, or rather the context an art centre creates can produce artists.

I'm the pure product of Grenoble in many ways, and you are also the product of, in some way, the invitation that you received when we met years ago: you were invited by some people to come to do a residency, so you are also the product of residencies. I do believe it's enough if maybe a museum or an art centre, or whatever you call it, the new art centre of the future, can produce artists. If you can change two or three lives of kids, that's enough already. It's a lot.

The first artist producing spam

*Today, we are going to explore a new method for conducting an
interview. We are going to read some of your notes and insert
some questions.*

PP: OK! [*Reading aloud*] 'The problem with art catalogues is that they are books without an author.'

The catalogue is the answer, but what is the question?

PP: Do you like catalogues? Maybe ... There are some really funny things written here. I don't know why I write these things.

When do you write them?

PP: All the time! When I am drunk! [*Laughs*] Most of the time. Some people make drawings. I write down my ideas most of the time. Drawing is something else. There are some funny lines. Like 'A Talkative Alien: why can't we imagine an alien that never stops talking? E.T. never talks much.' Why does it seem so paradoxical?

That's a question.

PP: There is a question and an answer.

*It's like a cadavre exquis ... **

PP: I've been doing it for ages.

'The sanity sewer's systems created modern cities.'

PP: '... with the abolition of the cult of burning fragrant smoke in church one could smell the poor and the rich ... / ... would the evacuation of carbon dioxide produce an urban revolution today?' That is a weird one.

Here's something about the idea of a snow festival.

PP: Yes!

So are these unrealized projects?

PP: They are rather funny thoughts, really, more about the way my brain works. Sometimes it's interesting to read things again. 'An out-of-focus art magazine' remains a good idea. I should write more often ...

'A video game produces dialogues – the dialogues of the players. If you cut the images of the game with the conversation generated while playing you could have a feature film without shooting any images.'

PP: 'A series of clouds of narration.' Sounds like Umberto Eco.

'In the 1950s even in strong industrialized regions, the workers' families still produced their own essential food.'

PP: Yes, the workers' gardens, growing potatoes and breeding chickens, and so on. 'The clothes would be made by women using a Singer.'

I don't get that.

PP: Singer was the brand of a sewing machine.

'A tool of production became an object of consumption.' What about Thomas Pynchon? You never talk about him.

PP: No, I know. I really liked a sentence of his. 'Authors as entrepreneurs ... in 1970 there was a joyous idea and a frightening one ... Carrefour like Disney ... is a well-known author but a bad artist.' I like to see Carrefour as a bad artist.

'Nostalgia's accusation of the cinema's evolution can be attributed to two phenomena' – can you mention these two phenomena?

PP: 'To cut and to talk, two phenomena which reduce cinematographic creators to mercenary illustrators founded in the commercial profitability ...'

'The last thing I clearly remember is the rain – the rain and the smell of the rain. I love that smell. I always did. I wore the same green army pants and a jacket that gave off this strong smell of dog with humidity. These are the smells that remind me of the coolest days of my life – rainy days and black skies; days passed hanging out at home eating sweets whilst watching TV. This was ten years earlier, I must have been five or six.' Who wrote this?

PP: Still me.

So this is a text of yours? 'The authorities in Budapest didn't want to have anything to do with us. Even in Eastern Europe no city

wanted us. The authorities freaked when rumours spread that we were in town.'

PP: It's called 'The Underground Man'. It's a short novel.

'We needed to be on the down-low, and they didn't have any way to stop us. We never moved around with our equipment. The only ones who did were those who were authorized to give concerts. We were never authorized and they never wanted us to be, but we were nothing to do with that crap.'

PP: Keep going ...

'Honestly if you asked me today I don't think our music was more interesting than the shit that most people were listening to. I wasn't that into music for a long time. I must have been twelve years old the last time I rocked out to a song. It was on a black Madonna album. Generally I avoided talking about music. If my friends talked about it I shut my mouth to avoid arguments. It wouldn't have done any good to talk. No one would have understood anyway. I didn't want to explain anything to anybody. I didn't want to explain or convince – I saw things differently and that's all. It was great. I had understood something and that's what made me different. It was a nice feeling, you know. This feeling of being able to see things coming.' That's great.

PP: Thank you.

It's a long text.

PP: Yes, it gets better at the end.

And again it's about your relationship to music. 'What I really enjoyed was giving concerts. To see the chemistry operating, the way it worked – it was a trip. You had to choose a place, get equipment, plug it in, test it at the last minute and then you feel the fear rising and people stand together; they look at each other

without seeing and then they wait. You feel the pressure of not knowing what's pure magic. No two concerts were alike. I was the programmer. Each concert was pure magic and no two concerts were alike. The energy was never the same and the violence was unique. Each night was different, as were the consequences. That evening the police surrounded the stage right away; we were isolated from the crowd before we had finished plugging in the sound, the keyboards and computers; the amps were really loud. A cloud of electromagnetic waves escaped from the loudspeakers and all about us. You could feel it; night fell quickly and everything turned blue. The stage was lit only by rotating police beams and through lightning flashes and then it started to rain. That was the moment that I had the idea; everything fell into place. I started by attaching wireless microphones to my friends and then I checked the radio frequencies before setting myself up. DJs were waiting in front of turntables; there were around thirty of us equipped with microphones. We grouped together and charged the police. We threw punches and kicked as hard as we could. In the beginning they had no idea what was going on, so for a while we were ahead. But then there were more of them and they started to nail us. I curled up into a ball and started listening. It was incredible. Each blow we received was processed by the PC and sent to amps to produce a pure beat. The DJs mixed with this rhythm; the crowd started to get into it, to dance and to beat each other to the music. It was raining like hell.

I saw my blood mix and dilute in water on the floor. I turned my head to see more and to hear better and had just enough time to see some wet snowflakes before a club came down on the side of my head.'

It's incredible. So the title is 'The Underground Man'. Can you tell me about this text?

PP: I wanted to write a text that describes an event. It's short enough for you to get a kind of synthesized little image in your head while reading it.

Is it related to your idea of producing ten-minute films?

PP: Yes. It takes time to start a new series of projects, but it's not like the language – it's more about being post-symbolic in a way; you start doing something and then somebody else continues it. You're not exchanging signs but the thing itself. I sent that text to a lot of people, to Anri [Sala], Doug Aitken, Mathias [Augustyniak] and James Chinlund that you met. It's nice that it's short. I don't know where it might lead, but it could be a really great starting point for an exhibition – instead of starting with a complex structure, you just send a text.

You want to send it to different people?

PP: I did. It's like a text sent directly to people by email. It is what you call direct database and internet marketing; what you call 'spam'. It is spam. I guess I am the first artist producing spam. [*Laughs*] I should send it again and again, and again spam comes back all the time after all ... Do you remember the discussion we had with Jaron [Lanier] when he spoke about virtual reality? He started talking about virtual reality as a way to engage people in a post-symbolic form of communication. In some way it sounded really obvious, but when you think about it, it's a really great idea. Not using signs, but using the thing. That's what Liam [Gillick] keeps doing when he starts making shows and invites people to get involved on different levels. The *cadavre exquis* was based on the same idea – which leads to something which is not planned.

[Reading aloud] 'I present here in a quite succinct way the results of research from several years.' One has to say that it is a thin book! 'Research of philosophical order of no moral interest, of no political and of no social interest. This preliminary precision is rendered useful by today's frequent confusion of philosophy and history and the usual reduction that follows from the former to the

latter. It is a confusion that already enters a little in my topic, in the modern interest in historicity of the “real” .’

PP: This is like a clue, as in a crime story.

‘An indictment, among others, of the difficulty one feels by taking into consideration the “real” by itself. This pain, or difficulty, is, by the way, without excuses, the “real” being by its singular constitution one among everything that offers the least natural form of being taken into consideration.’

PP: It’s always circling around the same reality problem. NO MORE REALITY!

Chains of images

There is, I think, a sentence that really sums up your relationship with your work today: you say, ‘Today, there are no longer images that are beautiful, there are chains of images.’ I think this phrase could also be a departure point for this conversation.

PP: Yes, what I meant by ‘chain’ I think is a dynamic structure that produces forms: pre-production, production, post-production, these narrative instances depend upon each other. In the course of the chaining of these sequences, a narrative unfolds. An image, a building, or a film comes from a more vast narrative structure, to which they belong and which they are elements of. In robotics, people use a very precise term, but I don’t remember it any more. But we can talk about a threshold of tolerance or linear adjustment to describe this time frame, this delta in which a number of events can occur, it’s a semiotic chain. I like meta-stories, stories of stories. Is an object always the end of something? Does everything really always start with a scenario and end with an object? Should there always be a happy ending to everything? Why wouldn’t there be many endings given to stories?

So you want to escape that fate?

PP: The degree of resolution of an idea depends on an economic choice, which either you make, or is imposed on you. I am often more interested in procedures than in resolutions. In *The Shining* [1980], by Stanley Kubrick, there's a scene in which the cook explains to the little boy – 'You know, Doc, when something happens it can leave traces of itself behind, it's like when you burn toast.'

Precisely. It seems to me that most collaborations between artists and architects are motivated by this research about the difference between conceiving and realizing a project, just like the work you're doing with François Roche. Where do you locate the beginning of this common interest of architects and artists for different modes of exhibiting and experimenting, and for ephemeral, undetermined forms?

PP: Collaborative practices are made of games and desires, so first comes the pleasure of playing. Games based on mutual support through intertwining, interwoven relations, transfers of strength and authority, contacts across a void, mutual support, bilateral intentions animating the world in its linguistic form before becoming a reality. To quote the graphic novelist Alan Moore, 'In the beginning there was the word.'

There was of course the collaboration between Yves Klein and Claude Parent on immaterial architecture. There were also other forms of collaboration like Rauschenberg's White Paintings [1951] on which Merce Cunningham projected a film, and John Cage wrote his silent piece for the event. But radical architecture disappeared after the Venice Biennale in 1972. The history of architecture is a history of the object. There are some exceptions; for example, Parent/Klein [together with Claude Parent, Yves Klein developed the concept of an immaterial 'Air Architecture' from the late 1950s on]. But it's the same for visual art. There are no art books that retrace the history of the exhibition.

Yes, the history of art is one of objects, and to a lesser extent one of exhibitions. Exhibitions aren't collectible, and in this case they

aren't archived. As soon as time passes, they tend to be forgotten. This amnesia that affects exhibition history has pernicious and very deep effects.

PP: If the amnesia is the symptom I wonder what will be the disease?

And it's striking to see to what extent the questioning of the object by artists is a recurrent question that disappears and reappears. The early 1990s make a very explicit return to forms of questioning the object. How do you envision the way in which you treat this question in relation to the ways artists did in the 1960s and 70s?

PP: From the 1980s on, Sony and Thompson have been after the issue of resolution. The point is not to produce images, but to produce images with a good resolution. This idea was really like a virus. The issue was widely discussed in the 1960s and 1970s while some artists sold emptiness. In the 1960s and 70s, the question of the object had been debated around very spectacular political and aesthetic questions. If today I wanted to approach these questions with Lawrence Weiner or Daniel Buren, I would quickly have the impression of being an illiterate, brainless neo-liberal.

Isn't there, all the same, a kind of dynamic that could explain why such issues appear again and again?

PP: Art schools ask their students to resolve their ideas into a form. Whereas to me, it's exciting when the content overflows beyond the form or the other way round. It's the irresolution that is interesting. The dynamic of fluids is interesting because they question equilibrium.

Jean-François Lyotard asked these questions in 1985, in the exhibition 'Les Immatériaux' [Centre Pompidou, Paris]. Was that exhibition important for you?

PP: It was a superb exhibition. It provided a reading experience. The catalogue of 'Les Immatériaux' was printed on slips of paper. It was made up of a series of exchanges between different people during a period of

time. A sort of intranet had been set up. That was the first time the internet was used as a tool, not as an icon, but as a tool. The show in itself was surprising in the curatorial choices, in the manner in which objects and experiences were arranged. It was superb.

Was it a philosophical exhibition, like some complained at the time?

PP: 'Les Immatériaux' was an exhibition producing ideas through a display of objects in a space. It was very different from writing a book or developing a philosophical concept. And that's precisely what I loved in that exhibition, that it wasn't a conceptual exhibition. I learned later that Lyotard wanted to do another exhibition, 'Resistance'. 'Resistance' isn't a good title. You immediately think about a series of moral issues. But when I met him, I understood that he meant in fact resistance in another way. In school when you study physics you are told that frictional forces are not important – the forces of two surfaces in contact let certain axioms become uncertain. I think that's what 'Resistance' was supposed to be about.

Why not try to realize this second exhibition? That could really work against the widespread amnesia of the history of exhibitions.

PP: Someone should try to find his notes. Posthumous books are published, why not a posthumous show?

It would also be an occasion to reintroduce some slowness in the world of exhibitions, which has been hectic as far as the number of exhibitions is concerned. It would be another form of resistance.

PP: I think that this is a responsibility artists have or you have. But I like to move around, in a way I like to be distracted. Hard to de-fragment myself.

When you talk with other artists about this kind of alternative, what kind of project do you imagine: are you thinking of exhibitions, works and publications?

PP: Books are great exhibition displays ... maybe the experience of reading will become fundamental again. Reading is also a physical state; it demands a particular attention, a floating attention. The moments where you disconnect from the reading, when you start dreaming, are very pleasant. You are at once inside your head imagining things while you're being spoken to. I have lots of stupid ideas for books. I would love to make a book of images on the history of medical representation. From Leonardo da Vinci to virtual reality and synthetic images, all the techniques of representation have been invented by medicine. It would be fascinating to trace such a history. Modelling the liver happened in 3D before making *Terminator 2*. Another book would be on the manner in which men have rationalized their relation to their waste. There are ethnologists today studying the manner in which the question of the greenhouse effect is managed by nations. They study how nations can negotiate between themselves. New extra-national bodies are created. In the same way that plumbing redesigned cities, the treatment of the greenhouse effect will modify our landscape. The Palace of Versailles had been designed to evacuate odors ... The Tokyo Accords are a part of the history of the treatment of human secretions. That would make a beautiful book, a book of landscapes and of very spectacular spaces. I would also love to make a book on zoos. Zoos are very accurate mirrors of the way we see ourselves in cities. I like the idea that zoos are the unconscious of cities.

What about magazines?

PP: I love to read magazines. The cut-up of the magazine offers possibilities of very open readings, but without the articulation or the need for a classical narrative arch.

In terms of books, there is also this book project on the history of copyright and the rights of the author that you're working on. At the same time, one can also see the Annlee project [2000–2003] as questioning the problem of copyright. Many issues begin to stack up.

PP: The history of the copyright is running parallel to the history of individualism and of liberalism. It's a history starting with the Statute of Anne in England. And it is the history of a right that was detained by those in power, and which, by delegation, was given to the printer, then the printer gave it to the editor, the editor to the author. Today the authors nourish the capital. These Oscar-type parties begin to multiply. Even in art exhibitions we see longer and longer credits. The Annlee project gives the author the right to sign itself, to have its own autonomy. But Annlee is also the follow-up of *Vicinato* [*Vicinato I*, with Carsten Höller and Rirkrit Tiravanija, 1995; *Vicinato II*, with Liam Gillick, Douglas Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe and Rirkrit Tiravanija, 2000]. How can several artists be in the same image and share it? Annlee is an image – a small manga character, a melancholic sign – that some people shared for a while. Do you know this book *Painters and Villains* written by Maurice Piazola?

He describes the attempt of a pre-Marxist revolution at the beginning of the sixteenth century led by serfs and peasants. It was an insurrection that came from Germany. The book talks about the voyage of a peasant who travels throughout Europe looking for a painter who will agree to design the flag that will identify the upcoming revolution. Annlee is also the story of a community that finds itself in an image. A temporary collective.

And what about the 'Temporary School' project [with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Pierre Huyghe, 1997], which was also a form of alternative intervention in the art world, but this time more in relation to schools and institutions rather than to museum structures?

PP: The 'Temporary School' is temporarily closed. Basically, we wanted to create a displaced school, to directly summon the real in the school. It was a parasitic school. But we made only one session.

Could we speak about the catalogue for your exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris? Your idea was to design the catalogue as a pop-up book?

PP: The pop-up book is the first idea for the monographic exhibition, but I am still missing too many elements to speak about it. I'll try to articulate an idea about the book. I would like to start from this book to then prepare an exhibition. We are going to Rotterdam to meet Rem Koolhaas to see if he can play the role of the architect of this book. I'm looking for someone who can help me go outside of it, as in a pop-up book, a space in paper. The invitation card, the poster, the catalogue – everything will be in paper. You could burn it easily ...

It's something opposed to, or very different from, the 'gallery gestures' that we often see today. In the previous discussion we had, you eliminated a large number of hypotheses, because you said that in reality everything leads to 'gallery gestures'.

PP: A 'gallery gesture' is easily reduced to its statement. I don't know if I would follow through with this idea ...

In an interview with David Lynch about Mulholland Drive [2001], he said that he didn't know what the end would be until he got there.

PP: Yes, he said that he knew that the film would start with the street sign 'Mulholland Drive' lit up by a car's headlights, and that later there would be many stories that he wanted to connect. The sum of these little stories forms a narrative cloud at the end. The accumulation of these points produces a more or less apparent structure. I have a book as a monographic space and this pop-up book as an exhibition space.

Which is a little like a children's book ...

PP: Many tales for children start with an open book that we enter, or a space concealed in a wardrobe. It's the structure of the tale.

Maybe the next thing we should talk about is Grenoble, and the question of Utopia and experimentation that you experienced living in Grenoble in the 1970s, when the city was a 'laboratory' of a new city. Maybe you can tell me about how Grenoble played

the role of a toolbox during these years. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster already told me a lot about her years in Grenoble. I'd like to hear about your experiences there.

PP: You see, everything depended on the teachers who had a lot of courage and political conviction, and it all stopped when these same people left. It was a very specific moment. We benefited from both this enthusiasm and this bankruptcy.

Were there real teachers, and very few conventionalists, in these schools?

PP: Yes, very convincing militants. Belatedly, at high school, there was Gilles Lipovetsky, who taught French and philosophy, and also at high school there was a drawing professor. There was also this cultural centre where we went to see Carolyn Carlson or Pina Bausch with the school. You could really fall flat on your face from time to time, but it was all fraught with an educational dynamic.

And when, and, in particular, how, did this all end?

PP: With the increase of Decaux signs ...

You mean the outdoor advertising company?

PP: Yes, Decaux, postmodernism, the end of political engagement, the disappearance of lightning bugs and red poppies, the morals of baby boomers, the arrival of Michel Platini at the Juventus Turin.

That's also what your film Credits deals with in some ways?

PP: Yes, it also comes from the fact that when you spend your childhood in a ZUP [Zones Urbaines Prioritaires/Urban Priority Zones] you see some houses being born and some dying. There weren't any images of those ZUPs. A text served as a model for *Credits*; it's at the end of Pier Paolo Pasolini's text derived from *Heretical Empiricism*, where he speaks of the multiplicity of necessary viewpoints for observing an event. In fact it's the figure of the hologram. For Pasolini, only a harmonization of subjective

points of view can offer a precise image of a given situation. To have an image of Kennedy's assassination, according to him, one must show all the films that were shot around the procession. While showing all these films, time would be lengthened and suspended like a hologram. I applied this idea, and I went to see kids that I grew up with, but also Michel Poniatowski, who was the Home Secretary under de Gaulle, and many other key personalities of that period, like Angus Young [guitar player of AC/DC], whom I loved. I then went to see the people who had been directly involved with the ZUP and the ZAC [Zones d'Aménagement Concerté/Zones of Adjusted Development] questions. The ZUP, contrary to the 'Grands Ensembles', were much less spectacular programmes.

Jean-Luc Godard also shot La Villeneuve, Grenoble's experimental housing and social project. That's where he established his production and distribution company Sonimage.

PP: Yes, and he participated with Anne-Marie Miéville on Villeneuve's cable channel. They also worked on the film *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* [1977–8] there, recording interviews with kids. So *Credits* was a collection of intersecting viewpoints, designed to form or reform an image. It's a bit like all these interviews you do. In your case, you are the point of intersection between people, whereas there it was an absent image.

Did you record or archive these conversations in one way or another?

PP: No. I recorded nothing. I started to have an idea of an image while talking with everyone. The recording of these discussions is this scene with trees with plastic bags tied to the branches. Kids would hook the plastic bags in the trees that the mayor planted in the vacant lots in the city. They did this to recuperate their playground, which the mayor had destroyed through green design. The ZUP were never completed.

So in Credits the process of interviewing all these different protagonists is as important as the film itself that lasts six minutes or so.

There's still another thing we haven't yet recorded, though we talked about it yesterday: your dust allergy and the way it has influenced your relationship to the object.

PP: I am allergic to dust, so I really can't accumulate things. When things accumulate, it gnaws at me, it's been like that for years, and it's getting worse and worse. I never keep books; I buy DVDs and then give them away. The biggest thing I have is this computer.

It's extreme, because for you, there's not only this will not to produce objects, but the impossibility to use or even keep objects.

PP: I put everything into boxes and then I throw them away. That simplifies everything.

So a studio is impossible in your case.

PP: Exactly. But many people work in their homes now. No, I don't have a studio. I can't even have an office. Mornings I tell myself that I must go to the office. No, I cannot manage my time like that. I don't even have an office at my house.

This is related to your theory of bourgeois time and your reflections about [Francis] Picabia. Have you finally written something on that?

PP: Yes, I tried to write about it. There was this book by Jean-Claude Milner, *Le Salaire de l'idéal*, in which he defines the concept of *otium*, time for oneself, defined as overtime, paid for by an over-salary. A historic time that belongs to the bourgeoisie ... More and more, this time is replaced by leisure time, by entertainment. The book raises the question of a democracy that doesn't provide the people time for themselves.

Speaking about books, there is also Douglas Coupland, who comes up more and more often in the discussions that we have. What interests you the most about his novels?

PP: It's a bit like Alighiero Boetti's lamp that lights up once a year: for Coupland, there are scenes that stay in your head for a very long time, things that resonate for a long time, like with Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work.

What is your favorite book by Coupland?

PP: *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

It's a song by the Smiths, and taken by Felix Gonzalez-Torres for the title of his exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

PP: It's a fantastic book.

What are the other writers that interest you? What about Neal Stephenson?

PP: Neal Stephenson is a super sci-fi author, Greg Egan is as well ... I read a lot of sci-fi literature.

Reading sci-fi is like seeing the most beautiful of cinemas.

And Stanislaw Lem? It seems that many artists are passionate about him today ...

PP: His use of language is fascinating. It's also very molecular science fiction; it's pharmacology. *The Futurological Congress* brings you into parallel zones, one reality chasing another. Each reality is contained in a pill. Each reality is a chemical construction.

Each has its own temporary definition, each lives its own Utopia.

PP: To invoke Utopias today is a bit like using a Geiger counter to look for radioactive traces. It's very *The Day After* [1983] ...

Apart from The Futurological Congress, what other books by Lem interest you?

PP: *The Mask and Solaris*.

You know, when I mentioned Tarkovsky to Lem in my interview with him, it was one of the only times that I had to interrupt an interview before the end. He totally hates him.

PP: It's not surprising. In his books there are words that produce images. The ocean of Solaris brings out the desires of each person ...

One of the paradoxes of interviews is that the transcription ignores the silences of a discussion, which are often the most important elements.

PP: You could insert blank pages in your interviews ...

We have talked about Serge Daney and the addiction to cinema. Could you tell me more about this?

PP: When I spoke of Daney, I wasn't talking about his theory of cinema. That's why I felt bad about Jacques Rancière ... Like all adolescents who want to be cool, I always read the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. It wasn't so much the moral code of the *Cahiers* that interested me. It wasn't Rivette and 'the travelling shot is a matter of morality'. It was Daney who spoke to me about the signs that would constitute my present. I remember one of his articles in the newspaper *Libération*, which traced a parallel between the Benetton campaign, Luc Besson's *Big Blue* [*Le Grand Bleu*, 1988] and Nanni Moretti's *Palombella rossa* [1989]. When I speak about the differences between Daney and Rancière I am not making a critique. It's just that I don't like him to moralize me.

But you should read his book La Nuit des prolétaires.

PP: Yes, it's just that I don't know what to do with this kind of text. I knew what to do with Daney's texts for the most part. On the one hand, more and more signs are produced, and on the other hand, it's hard to talk about them. Doug Aitken told me in an email, 'It's hard to edit your life without a time code.' It may be a Generation X reflection, but it's also something very profound. The relation to the present is very melancholic and very mediated. For the last forty years, from, let's say, the French *nouvelle vague*

to the British rock 'n' roll wave and until today – you can find different personal versions of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on different websites, all this has been created by people who have grown up as passionate fans of their media.

The notion of melancholy is a notion that's never come up in our previous discussions. Today it seems to be at the heart of your reflection.

PP: Yes, it's a dark sentiment, it's Melville ... I love these stories.

Melancholy can maybe offer a political alternative. Why did I think that melancholy was somehow an appropriate feeling? 'Appropriate' in a way that some tools are more appropriate than the others when you have to find a solution to a problem. Film noir is somehow relevant. You know this typical film noir that opens with a long scene, no dialogue, where the villain played by Alain Delon lies on his bed endlessly smoking a cigarette. The characters develop a unique relationship towards time and history, but that's another issue. The melancholic is a peculiar person who has an object of desire but has lost the desire itself. That is to say, he lost that which makes him desire the desired object: the object-cause of your desire, which is never the desired object.

How to build an aquarium

When did you start with the drawings, where would you mark the beginning?

PP: Quite recently, it would be about two years. When I became sick I started to draw, so yes, that was two years ago. When I was working on the garden project.

At that point it became really obsessive, but you always did drawings before that.

PP: Yes, but I was one of those artists who was always writing about ideas. But I was not into sketching ideas really, I was more into sketching with

words. When you start doing things, it's like grammar, so to speak, so the more you use it the more you develop the grammar, and the more you understand what you are really doing. And now I take a lot of pleasure doing it. And also I draw on small A4 sizes, so it is a bit like writing.

And at some moment you also started to do bigger drawings.

PP: Yes, now I feel more at ease with the technique. Last week I started to draw on the film that they use for the screen, and it is beautiful the way the ink and the water modifies the chemical products that they put on the film.

And there's another project that I wanted to do. I'm going to build this aquarium in the studio. And I am working with the aquarium of St Augustine because they specialize in cephalopods.

And that was actually the beginning, the cephalopods were the first drawings, more than two years ago.

PP: That was when we did the show together, at the Museum of Modern Art.

That's it, you started to draw. Although they are not really drawings; they are more like idea sketches, as you say. So I have these idea sketches. Still during the ARC [Musée d'art modernes de la ville de Paris] show you did only sketches, but at a certain moment when we worked on the Serpentine show about three years ago you began to make these drawings of the fish that change colour, what are they called?

PP: Cephalopods.

You made some small ones and some bigger ones, that's actually the beginning, right?

PP: Right, it didn't work out very well, because I didn't know what I was doing. And then I stopped. The first real drawings – I remember perfectly in fact – it was when I went to this retiring place – like a clinic – in Austria.

I was bored to death, and I started drawing there, because I didn't really know what else to do. I was writing a bit and getting bored of my own

writing, so I started to draw, and you know, the more you draw, the more you like to draw, so I ended up spending hours and hours doing that.

I started to draw trees.

You know what, I also started to draw when I did *Invisibleboy*, because I spent time with Roberto, a friend of mine who is an animator. Roberto was into drawing a lot and so we spent a lot of time talking about drawings and animation, and so it was while I was working on *Invisibleboy* – trying different things, sketching the film – that I started to draw. I think that was the opening door.

And now, to go back to cephalopods – I'm going to get this aquarium built in the studio, and I'm going to start to draw with them. They will be my collaborators, you know.

The cephalopods?

PP: Yes. I will show the motif, and I will produce the motif, and I will draw the motif, so I guess it will be a collaboration between me and them, or me and him. I think it's nice to start to collaborate with beasts.

I started by collaborating with artists, and now I'm collaborating with animals.

So first you collaborated with artists, and then you collaborated with scientists and science-fiction writers, and so on, and now with beasts.

So it's interesting – the drawing starts with the cephalopods, the cephalopods don't work out, you have the scratch drawing for Invisibleboy, you then go to the clinic in Austria and start to make the first drawings of the trees. Why suddenly there? Why trees?

PP: I was working on the *CHZ* project, and I started to sketch what would become the storyboard of the film. I had some plans from Bas [Smets] and I started to indicate, not the storyboard because it's not so advanced, but more the pictures of how the film will look. So I started to draw trees on my

sketchbook and then the woods. Because I had time, I started to do that more and more and more.

And there something happened where for the first time an almost Goya-like intensity entered. All your earlier drawings are relatively loose, they are like shapes, but there for the first time they became very intense and dark.

PP: That's the disease, because it became like an extension of what I was going through. At the time, in a way they were still really light, even the first drawings of the trees were light, and then they became darker when I started to draw during the chemotherapy sessions. So they became more neurotic. I was drawing more and more and more while they transferred the product into me, and obviously I was not in a good mood.

So they became darker.

PP: It started to become like a thing to expel. And the garden was basically that as well. To quote Bataille, it was all about what the mind rejects, what the mind doesn't want to recognize. So, reading Bataille and drawing, and thinking about the CHZ project, the drawing started to have more of a presence, to the point that I started to show them to you and to friends. Then came the idea from our friend Sam to show them in Basel, but before that I had never thought about that.

The cephalopods were influenced by a discussion I had a long time ago with Jaron [Lanier] about this ability for cephalopod to change the cells on their skin, to change their structure to form the structure of something else. For Jaron, the cephalopod was the ultimate artist, so to speak. And then I remember there was also this conversation I had about the cephalopod with Miquel Barceló.

And you wanted to do a film with him, that was a collaborative project?

PP: It never happened. It wasn't a film; we wanted to build a place for humans and cephalopods to meet.

So that was the beginning of your idea to have an aquarium.

PP: Yes, and it never took place, but I was going to the studio with Miquel Barcelo and he was drawing a lot of cephalopods at the time.

Miquel also has these notebooks, which are really the heart of his whole work – this one shelf, have you ever seen this shelf?

PP: With all the notebooks.

Yes, it's amazing. They are the notebooks from when he was a teenager in Majorca and Spain, which are full of sketches and watercolours. They are quite systematically arranged, about one or two hundred little books, and there are entire books full of these fish and cephalopods – it's a bestiaire, a bestiary. I would say it's probably the heart of his practice, no?

PP: Yes, he's a proper interesting guy.

And so the cephalopod leads to the unrealized collaboration with Miquel Barceló. And all of that anticipates the scratched little drawings. But the scratched little drawings for Invisibleboy are more like a storyboard, can one say that?

PP: Yes, all the drawings are storyboard-oriented: they were also a way to communicate the ideas of the film to Darius, because Darius was my intercessor, to put it in Deleuzian terms; he was the one the drawings were addressed to. They were addressed drawings. I really just drew in order to show people what I wanted to do, and so the drawings have a function. They became a tool of communication somehow.

And that changed for the first time really in the Austrian clinic, because there the drawings become autonomous, that's when it jumps into—

PP: Yes, slowly they became autonomous.

But tell me about Austria, which was first? When you were in Austria, was there already the idea of the film? Or did the film

idea grow out of the drawings?

PP: No, the drawings first ... I already had the idea of the film but it was abstract at the time and I started to draw because I didn't really write much about this project.

So you knew already that you wanted to build this garden, and then the drawings were ... Was it the idea of imagining this garden, or how did it ... ?

PP: It was imagining the land. I knew where the garden was to be built in Portugal, because I drew eucalyptus trees from the pictures I had taken. And so it's like a place that existed, because I went to the place on the way to Vienna, so I knew the place when I started to draw it. And I started to draw the pictures I took. All these drawings are to do with nature and animals and weird drawing process, so they were linked to a form of life in a way. *Invisibleboy* was also to make and to animate drawings to make them alive, in a way, so in a way the drawings were always linked to animation, or sequences. One leads to another, to another. I never made a drawing that stands by itself, so to speak. They are part of a series. All were repetition as well.

Repetition and difference.

PP: The hands know and recognize actions, so if you do it once, then twice, your hands start to do it, as a kind of practice, like a mantra.

But it's also interesting that after the Austrian clinic experience, it's like something was déclanche – was triggered – and ever since it hasn't stopped.

PP: And now I've started to make projects out of the drawing, which is a new thing. Like 'Firefly', which was basically a product of drawing, and not a drawing project.

I remember you told me about fireflies a long time ago; when did that project begin?

PP: I did a project in Arles some years ago with fireflies, do you remember, with the fake fireflies I set up in the park?

Can you tell me about this piece, the Villa Arson firefly?

PP: The project was based on the text of the article by Prigogine, the famous one which says that fireflies start to disappear when people start believing in ideas, ideologies. So I did some fake fireflies at Villa Arson, in the park, and those of course you will be able to see only when the exhibition is closed, at night. So it was a kind of anti-exhibition of work, since you cannot see it. So what you will see during the opening hours of the exhibition will be just the facsimile of the Prigogine text as a label on the wall, but there will be nothing to see. And then at night all the fireflies started to light up, so it was a really discreet work.

At that time there were no drawings, but then at some moment you started to draw them into books. I remember we once sat in a taxi when you signed books, you drew fireflies into books, they became like a personified abstraction, as Raymond Hains would say, they became like your signature.

PP: Yes, it's true. And of course the more you draw them, the better you get. I started to draw a lot of these fireflies as gifts; some were more developed than others, they were things to give to people, that's why I wanted to keep the same idea that those should be given to everybody.

So the 'Firefly' piece will basically be disseminated to all your friends.

PP: Yes. I might need a map of where they are.

And this is the first project where the drawings 'drive the car', because before there was always another car, and then the drawings happened to help facilitate, but here the drawings drive the car.

PP: Interesting, no?

Very interesting. But that obviously might happen more and more.

PP: No, but now I have this new project with the cephalopods where I want to draw *with* them, so they will be my collaborators. So I am going to have an aquarium in the studio and then I'm going to start drawing with them, showing the motifs—

How old do cephalopods get?

PP: They don't get very old really; they die after three or four years.

So they are basically very fragile?

PP: Yeah, they don't last long but they are kind of smart. And they don't have any culture because they have no parents to educate them about the world, so they have to do very fast everything by themselves. They communicate really fast, and learn really fast. I guess I'm going to have young cephalopods, and we'll start to play with them ... It's an experiment.

So it will be like a small presence in the studio at all times, but then at the same time they are your new assistants. That's exciting.

PP: More than an assistant really; they are co-authors.

How many will you have?

PP: I'm going to start with two, and then ... You see, the thing about the aquarium is it is quite big; I may end up having a studio full of cephalopods and nobody else but them and me! *[Laughs]*

And then I still haven't understood how you will draw with them technically, will you use paper or film?

PP: It's a film that you can solarize, it's a kind of chemical product that is reactive to light, and it's really amazing when you put water on it. It's going to become more and more specialized, the technique.

So it is an invention of technique.

PP: Yes, of technique. It will become like Black Mountain technique.

The new technique that no one ever used before.

PP: You like that?

That's brilliant!

PP: The thing that I find is that when I start to draw I start to write less, which is interesting. So I become a cephalopod, working with pictures. The trigger was really the film.

And once the film was done, the park or garden was built.

PP: Then I started to work on *Marilyn*.

And what were the first drawings for Marilyn, can you remember that?

PP: I started to work with a storyboard, but then I didn't write anything on *Marilyn*, I started not to write any more. I would talk to the guy and say, 'This is how I see the film, this is how it works', and he started to draw, and then he would send me the drawings, and I would send him back drawings. So it became like a way to visualize. I thought it was kind of an easy way to communicate, or to structure the film, because the film had a strong conceptual framework, but was going to be shot in kind of a random way; it didn't have any borders, it just had a few scenes, and we didn't really know if it would be long or short. And then of course during the production of the film I started to draw less because I was busy doing the film, so I didn't have time to draw the things that I wanted to draw.

And then at a certain moment the automaton entered.

PP: Yes, I am going to try also to work with a robot, with the automaton, because what we did now is the same machine that we used for *Marilyn* but I developed it to become ... We created a mechanical hand made of prosthetic, and it is random because basically the hand movement on the paper is always different, so you can draw a circle and the robot will draw

the same circle that you draw, but if you ask the robot to repeat it, it will be different, because the hand is kind of random.

The idea also had its beginnings when I worked with a lawyer on my will, in case I did not come through. I thought it would be nice if the death initiated the creative process, so that when I'm dead, robots start to draw. So death could trigger a series of drawings. All these things are connected in a way: I develop this robot and the robot will be able to write like me – And now we are going to develop more and more. I'm going to draw with an automaton, and then I'm going to draw with cephalopods. I'm going to draw with machines, and with beasts.

To finish, what are the drawings now in the studio? You do the fireflies.

PP: Yes, the fireflies.

So for the fireflies, the idea is to do hundreds?

PP: Yes, I'm going to make a hundred and twenty. They will be spread out around the world. And I'm doing the mechanical hand. So I'm going to start working with the automaton, and we have to make three thousand drawings.

Why three thousand?

PP: They send them to people with the annual report thing, so I thought that would be a good task for the automaton, to do three thousand different drawings. And I like the fact also that the drawings should not be ... Something I find I want to do now more, I want to give things; I just think it's nice.

That they go into the world. It's a bit like Boetti.

PP: Yes, they should not go into the markets, it's another thing.

REM KOOLHAAS

I first met Rem Koolhaas after reading his books (Delirious New York and S,M,L,XL) again and again when I was researching the exhibition 'Cities on the Move' in 1995. I co-curated the show with Hou Hanru, bringing Asian artists and discussion of Asian cities into Europe. Hanru and I went to Rotterdam to meet Rem Koolhaas and waited in his studio for an entire day, but he was too busy to see us. At the end of the day he apologized and said, 'I'm actually going to Asia now, why don't we meet tomorrow in Hong Kong?' So Hou and I got on a plane and met him there, and we haven't stopped talking since.

Later I worked with Rem on Project Japan which was started in 2005 when Stefano Boeri, then the editor of Domus Magazine, proposed that Rem and I should interview the architects of the Metabolism movement.

Around the same time, I conceived the idea of an interview marathon; a 24 hour event, the first incarnation was in Stuttgart in 2005. Then in 2006, Julia Peyton-Jones and I collaborated with Rem for the Serpentine Gallery summer pavilion to produce an even busier marathon, this time inviting 72 people for conversations over 24 hours. The pavilion itself was designed by Rem and Cecil Balmond, with ARUP, and featured a spectacular inflatable canopy that hovered over Kensington Gardens.

What follows are fragments from endless conversations, beginning in 2004.

Europe as a cultural project

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *You have been thinking intensely about Europe for some time now. The culmination of this seems to be your recent series of exhibitions called 'The Image of Europe' and its vast panorama of European history. How did this project start? I recall that a few years ago, you told me about your participation in a think tank about Brussels in which Umberto Eco was involved ...*

REM KOOLHAAS: In December 2000, at the summit of the European Union (EU) in Nice, it was decided that Brussels would be the capital of the EU. Both Romano Prodi, the president of the European Commission (EC), and Guy Verhofstadt, the prime minister of Belgium, were involved, but neither of them had a sense of the implications of that decision. So they called together a group of people and had a day-long brainstorming session, followed by two more meetings. It was a very interesting group, although most of the people were men. The group included, among others, a French movie-maker, the guy who invented Swatch, and Umberto Eco. We spent the first day trying to define what the elements or emblems of 'a capital' are, and were asked to invent a 'European' institution, like a museum of 'European' civilization. Yet, we felt that those kinds of institutions are really ponderous, onerous and uninteresting. I believe it was Umberto Eco who proposed that, instead of an actual museum, we might conceive of a virtual museum. The most crucial and painful impression that came out of this was how little I and other invited people knew about how the European Union works. So I went back to the office a bit embarrassed about my profound ignorance as a European intellectual of the institution that has been drastically changing Europe. I was determined to correct our ignorance. That was the basis for our Europe project. We started looking at

Brussels and wondering what could be done in that city, by analysing how 'Europe' is present in Brussels. That led AMO to begin a study of the iconography of Europe and, by implication, to study the status of that iconography today.* We presented this to Romano Prodi and Guy Verhofstadt, and they, in turn, asked us if our work could be considered the official result or product of the brainstorm. And that is, to some extent, and by default, how we became involved.

In the past, we spoke about invisible cities, especially in the context of your 'Mutations' project, but what you described is, in a way, an invisible continent: Europe. Could you talk a bit about this?

RK: 'The Image of Europe' project has been particularly interesting because we worked so long on it that it enabled us to work in different phases, and to come to conclusions that were not at all evident in the beginning. In essence, we found that the iconography that represents Europe is profoundly inadequate, and that inadequateness is, I think, partly responsible for the low regard in which Europe is held. We discovered this when we were looking at Brussels, the city, but also at the history of the EU, and how it represents itself. The ambition to create a united Europe is such an incredible project and had to overcome so many obstacles that a certain degree of invisibility in the beginning was very productive for proceedings, but later became problematic in terms of communication. Our own work evolved over time and took on unexpected dimensions; we abandoned the emphasis on the iconographic and started to look at what had been achieved by the EU, how it had been achieved, and the fundamental reasons for its existence, but also how it was crafted and what potential directions it could take in the future. Then we began to look at how such achievements might be communicated.

I remember you often spoke about engaging in politics. Jacques Delors speaks about the necessity to re-politicize, and about the crisis of European construction, which is a paradox because

Europe has never been more interesting and active before. Dozens of countries want to join the EU ...

RK: Interestingly enough, when we started working on this project in early 2001, there was no interest whatsoever in Europe as a political institution. It really was a blank spot. So in that sense, it is a fascinating development that within four years, it has become the subject – that's a fantastic development for all parties. But it also means that our tone had to change all the time because, in the beginning, we had to draw attention to an unknown issue that everyone now knows is a crucial one.

How did that initial study lead to the exhibition in Munich and Brussels? And when does the invention of a barcode flag for Europe emerge in this process? In the past, you've mentioned propaganda and the propagandistic nature of such things as flags and codes. Is that the case here, too?

RK: The flag reflects an initial, playful, and not particularly serious, idea. It suggested that there might be other ways to make the EU visible than through existing morose symbols. When we studied it in a more fundamental way, we realized that, since states or governments didn't really advertise or proclaim the reasons for the EU any more, Europe needed to develop its own dialogue to explain and advertise why it exists. We looked at the history of propaganda. Propaganda is usually defined by sound bites or by simplifying issues. The beauty of Europe is that you cannot simplify it, as it is an infinitely complex process. So in the end, we interpreted what we were doing as propaganda for complexity – a paradox. The exhibition, therefore, consists of two parts: the history of Europe and the history of the EU. After World War Two, it became possible, for the first time, to define a European narrative objective and to integrate the entire story without lying, but nevertheless negotiating the paradoxes that characterized Europe: that one nation's villain is another nation's hero. If you look at the current tensions between China and Japan, you see what an achievement this single history has been. It is really a very persistent issue. In our project, we made

a very serious effort to develop a narrative that is valid for all parties and tells the history of the EU, which includes all the important moments, disasters, crises, arguments, actors and triggers for change in a way which hasn't been done and which is accessible. We have our own hesitations, of course; we wonder whether it is intellectually serious or respectable enough or whether it is the right thing to do at this moment, but on the one hand, you could be more earnest, and on the other hand, you could be more populist, and yet I think it proposes ultimately plausible dimensions of Europe's history.

These multiple dimensions made it a very interesting project to me. I would like to ask you more about the historical panorama as it took shape. In it, the writings of thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Peter Sloterdijk, Benedict Anderson and others are brought into action. I didn't think of the project as tracing the finished past or unforeseeable future of Europe, but as a form of dynamic memory – Derrida called it 'double memory'. In Europe, reactionary forces are co-opting the use and the entire notion of memory, making it static. Neuroscience has proven that memory is dynamic. But I think that Europe has a kind of memory problem

...

RK: I think that is entirely true, and that is why this is an incredibly interesting project because you are really navigating between the oversensitivities of politicians, the vagueness of the average European's interest, the puritanism of the art world, and the jealousy of the academic world. It is a very contested territory. The more I think about it, the more I think that this could be our task: to try to undo some of those boundaries and to question some of those categorizations. I have realized that we are living in a completely paradoxical moment of modernization where all modernization is driven by nostalgia, on every level. Yet, we are absolutely disinterested in the past, in history. Auschwitz, for example, has become nostalgia, and there are more and more instruments of memory and less and less actual remembrance. That's quite a perverse thing. Nostalgia means

living permanently in a form of denial, and what is particularly sinister about it is that it is driving the left as much as the right, intellectuals as much as the general population. What is underneath all of this, and indeed, the essential operation that is necessary, is to redefine what ‘modern’ means.

What is amazing about your project is that a lot of those things are actually visualized. If one looks at a map, one sees that Europe is not a homogenized space. Can you say something about how those visuals combine with the multilingual aspect of the project? You call it ‘Eurobabel’, a Babelian dimension of multilingualism ...

RK: What is ultimately beautiful in the EU project – and maybe we are presently living in a very intense moment of it – is that, in spite of the efforts of the politicians and in spite of the efforts of bureaucrats, there is a new understanding of Europe developing and emerging that is completely independent of them. There is no construction of a super-state in progress, but rather the coexistence of difference, the construction of a virtue out of difference. And this is an incredibly rare thing. At the moment, there are many fears that the differences between European countries are disappearing, and that this is the way that the EU functions. Ethnologists are constantly counting the languages that are disappearing, the cultures, the species. But in fact, Europe is a very strong counterforce to that flattening and is investing in the preservation of regional difference, though ironically at the cost of a certain ‘inefficiency’.

You could say that the entire project is a post-September-11 project, in the sense that we felt there was a compelling reason for Europe to develop a degree of representation that would be sufficiently robust so that the Bush vision would not abuse it, because Bush has been putting all kinds of wedges into any seam that Europe revealed. That is the underlying theme in the whole project. But a further instinct driving it is that, since September 11, we are able to realize that there is a connection between Europe, Russia, China and India, which means that, for the next twenty-five years, Eurasia

is the site where both creativity, productivity, and the next iteration of all these separate identities and the relationships between them as a larger whole will be identified. That's an instinct of mine, but I feel wholly convinced that it's true, and, as you may remember, we discovered it by looking at the increased air traffic in all these countries at the expense of the Arctic Circle.

I want to ask you about the relationship of culture to your project. I have been rereading Denis de Rougemont, and thinking about his idea of a cultural Europe. I wonder how you see 'The Image of Europe' as a cultural project of the twenty-first century?

RK: I think that to speak of a 'cultural project' today is too limited, and that is partly because culture has become part of the market economy. Perhaps the only domain that is not entirely absorbed by the market is the political domain. If you talk about real imagination at the surface of more than commercial forces or more than strictly limited forces, then politics is a culture in itself. That is also a positive outcome of globalization: we live in such an incredibly radical moment that the best way to participate is through politics rather than culture. It is wonderful, though, to give the project a cultural reading and to interpret it also as an effort to politicize architecture.

Do you see this as a further step away from architecture? Indeed this project – set up in a readymade circus tent in an open public space in Brussels and then in an existing art museum, the Haus der Kunst, in Munich – had little to do with constructing or imagining a new architecture and even less to do with design.

RK: It was the furthest we ever went in not relying on any explicit reference or connection to architecture, and the project is really driven by the ambition to ultimately disconnect from architecture. For us, personally, it has been incredibly important that – as the rest of the architectural field is increasingly preoccupied by last year's biennial and moving in the direction

of an astonishing process of homogenization – we wished to step away from that and announce our final lack of interest in it.

‘The Image of Europe’ project took the form of an exhibition. What chance do you think exhibitions have to awaken public awareness or motivate change? I ask because, increasingly, large-scale international exhibitions like documenta, the proliferating biennials all over the world, and even the itinerant European biennial, Manifesta, aim at being platforms for the visualization and discussion of the political implications of globalization, border openings, immigration and even Europe.

RK: The point about ‘The Image of Europe’ show was its limitations to the construction, workings and future of Europe, independent of any other issues, let alone our ‘feelings’ about Europe.

One could say that Europe’s relationship to its past is one that revels in a nostalgia about its moments of strength, even if those moments are long past. I want to ask you about weakness and strength in relation to Europe, not because I am interested in a propaganda of strength, but because I’m interested in how to turn the weaknesses of Europe into a strength. It seems that Europe is in an incredibly weak condition right now ...

RK: Theoretically, Europe is reinventing its power now. And power is in the ‘aquis communautaire’, in the accumulation of rules. Those rules, in this case, determine the quality of food, the quality of communication, the quality of political rights, the quality of workers’ rights, etc. Those rules make up a new form of power, one that is more potent than guns, and the eighty thousand pages of rules actually represent an ideological construct that makes anyone who follows them ‘European’, to some extent, from that moment on. The rules have a really big effect on the world because in order to communicate better with Europe in terms of trade, for instance, certain countries are adopting whole sections of the EU legislation; they call it ‘syndicated legislation’, which I think is a beautiful word. The EU is

exporting its rules and negotiating them constantly. For example, the Third World has said that the EU's demands for hygiene are an indirect form of discrimination, so now the EU is thinking about lowering the demands for that. Certainly now, I think those rules really represent the future form of power exchanges. You see how Ukraine and other future participants drastically improved their conditions; Turkey did as well, so there has already been an enormous effect. That is the paradox of our internal, supposed weakness and the invisibility of our power ...

If we speak of Europe, it is also important to address the notion of citizenship. In your case, one could say you are composing an extreme 'collage' of citizenship: your office is in Rotterdam, you have houses in London and Amsterdam, you travel to other countries almost every week. But the same is true for someone who lives in Essen in the Ruhr region and originally comes from Turkey or Morocco. This idea of a different form of citizenship within Europe or the world is something I want to ask you about ...

RK: I think that the current discussion about immigration is taking a suicidal and dangerous tenor because what resistance to immigration denies – and I think that it's fundamentally connected to an inability to grasp the contemporary – is what Europe's potentials are. We are not alert enough in embracing some of the positive consequences. To use an example: in Amsterdam in the 1960s, there was a horrible, planned project, the Bijlmermeer, and in 1972, white people moved in, started moaning about it not being finished, and immediately turned around to go back to the city; this meant that the buildings became available to recent immigrants from Turkey, Ghana, etc. There were the most incredible discussions between young leftist politicians and academics in Amsterdam saying, 'Get rid of this, and this, and this', and that's where I find the academic world basically useless because, in effect, these buildings turned out to be incredibly creative, capturing the dynamism and diversity of all those new citizenships. The immigrants organized the entire project complex. They

self-organized things, dedicating blocks to one nationality or another. They imported their own drugs, their own merchandise, and filled their own supermarkets. Everything became incredibly multilingual, and they created their own radio stations. Actually, what was going on was really incredible, but no one saw it, no one got it. Even today, it's treated as a disaster zone. I think that in the rest of the world, there is the same kind of thing. The typical pizza restaurant in Germany, for instance, is run by Turks, and yet the discussion among politicians is that these people should know about German history and should have at least a minimal sense of belonging to an identity, so it is a completely counterproductive and reactionary idea and also part of this nostalgia. It would be really interesting to locate that moment when nostalgia started to become the dominant mode.

Can we be subversive?

Could you give some examples of how the pressures of the market economy have been affecting architectural practice?

RK: We have been looking at shopping and at the way it has developed, starting at the market and then becoming consolidated in the scale of an arcade, the shopping store, bigger and bigger, but still shopping in its pure form. Now, this is changing and is part of the same shift from the public to the private, in the same way that it infiltrates every single activity known to man – be it an airport, a church or a museum, an educational establishment, a hotel or even the private house – to a point where these activities are no longer conceivable or sustainable without the additional income of shopping and where shopping is no longer possible without the hybridization of all these other activities. Whether we want to or not, we are living in a completely problematic blur where the former distinction of entities, institutions and identities has fundamentally changed and this has had a radical effect on architecture. For example, architects don't look at shopping; if you look statistically at architectural reviews, it turns out that shopping is only the thirtieth most popular subject, and it is simply never written about and remains invisible.

Can you tell me about 'Junkspace' [2002]?

RK: One of the consequences is that parts of the building are never in the same space, which inevitably means that certain parts of the building are dying while other parts are being reborn, others are being used while some are still being finished. So, where buildings used to exist in one single time, now each part has a different time frame and we have become completely used to the fact (although it is an insane situation) that half of our building scheme is in the process of conversion. Now it only consists of taping, gluing, not even hammering. So therefore, what has become the prominent force (and it can only be related to the market economy) is this unbelievably shared exposure of every individual, from the most famous to the most normal. I think that Andy Warhol famously said that everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes; I think reality is much more tragic, much closer to hell, in that everyone will be famous for ever.

We are condemned to be collectively famous! So basically, to define the architecture that we are working in, the text which is called 'Junkspace' was based on a famous economic model that has fuelled the market economy over the last thirty years. As you may know, in various theories 'space junk' is the debris that is created by different satellite and planetary ventures. In a way, all the world relies on has the same junk status – junk space. It is not a negative term, but just the kind of term that defines the expectations and the properties that architecture can have today.

One of the questions I wanted to ask you, Rem, is: what do you think about big museums – from your early museum projects up to the recent Whitney project and your current project in LA? They are all XL or XXL museums. In previous discussions, you have often mentioned the necessity of reinjecting slowness and maybe silence into museums as well as reinjecting laboratory conditions into a big structure. So far, this has been an unrealized project. I wonder if you could tell us about this current museum condition and the feasibility of making these ideas work?

RK: In a way, I think there is nothing which architecture can generate that guarantees a solemnity or seriousness in contemporary culture which would ever deserve to go in a chapel. I think it can only happen if there is a big synchronization of the museum director or curators and the architects. And I think that architecture is somehow expected to be able to resurrect lost pretensions, to slow down the whole machinery. The irony is that it can never be anything but a reflection of those things. But for me, it is interesting because we did a project that was overtly based on the accelerated route and the serious route, so you could visit the place at two paces, one is a kind of tourist visit and the other the Tate visit. In the end, they chose the Herzog & de Meuron project because it had this ability to offer serenity, to offer intimacy. Unless there is an incredibly intimate collaboration, architects can never stop.

It is also a question of the commissioner – who commissions museums? Are museums in danger of becoming tokens of profitability?

RK: Or tokens of sacrifice. It's tokenism either way. But without getting too gloomy, I think there is a virtue – and I don't care to use the term 'political action' – in politicizing this whole debate, which is, I think, one of the things raised by September 11th, after which a number of procedures are no longer possible. I think there is a direct connection between the events of September 11th and the imminent bankruptcy of the Guggenheim system. I'm not saying that's a good thing, but we can expect an imminent transformation of the current conditions. I think there is something inherently poisonous about the market economy in the way that it's the last word in ideology.

Perhaps one could talk about the notion of unpredictability. Currently, it is mainly contemporary art museums that are being built, and there is a paradox in that they are built for the future, for art that is yet to come; the big issue is how not to impose structures but how to allow self-organization to happen. There is

a very interesting manifesto written by the urbanist Yona Friedman in Paris, in which he has somehow developed ideas for a museum for the twenty-first century.

He compared the idea of developing a museum to his question of not developing a master plan, but rather of developing things that can trigger self-organization. So there is this idea of a non-plan, something that Cedric Price also pioneered through his Fun Palace, his visionary idea, from 1960, of developing a museum in which a high degree of improvisation and self-organization could be allowed to happen. So perhaps you could tell us a little about how you feel about these models – whether you feel they are nostalgic and whether you think they have any relevance today?

RK: It's difficult. There is a problem with the whole idea of spontaneity and the relationship between architecture and the everyday. I think there is an ironic situation shown by the famous King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold; architects are King Midas in reverse – when they look at something which is authentically from everyday life; the moment they look at it, it loses its integrity. Or at least it loses its spontaneity and authenticity. So I think in that sense I have an incredible sympathy for all those efforts, but I think that we are in possession of something that is both a virtue and a curse; the curse is that we can never leave things the way they are – we always have to change them, so the idea that you spontaneously change something and can be unpredictable becomes an affectation. Of course, you cannot predict the effect of your activities, but to plan it as an integral part of your activity is not possible. So if you want spontaneity or everyday life, you should keep architects as far away as possible.

Can you tell me more about issues of criticality and subversion and how these issues are addressed in your work?

RK: I think there is a dilemma in trying to address that issue. Every well-meaning person wants to be subversive because nobody supports the situation as it is. Every well-meaning person wants to be critical and, in that

sense, the whole issue of client and commissioner is a critical one, and we simply cannot find the support to be subversive. I think there is a huge hypocrisy in the assumption that you can be subversive, because architecture is always an incredibly big effort and costs a lot of money. It usually lasts for at least twenty years – it's getting shorter and shorter, but twenty years is still a general minimum. So, to work under the pretence that you can be subversive is another fiction or fairy tale. I think you can destroy architecture in a subversive way, but I don't think you can necessarily be subversive per se as an architect. It's a discussion I've been having for a long time with people like Peter Eisenman; he is subversive – he uses angles of eighty-seven degrees! In other words, subversive is a style and nothing more, but that does not mean that you cannot be involved in activities which are subversive – you can write against architecture and you can undermine the arrogance of other architects, and so on. I would also find it offensive – what would subversive architecture in Las Vegas mean? That you subvert the casino? How do you subvert a casino? Do you make gambling more metaphysical? Do you have better-educated prostitutes? What is subversion in that context? I must say that it can still be a transforming experience. It was an unbearable experience – I came out not necessarily a better human being, but certainly someone with a larger understanding. So what needs to be subverted? This is what is so bothersome about terminology and discourse around architecture. It is always thought that the subversive is better than that which is not.

How do you see the links between architecture and urbanism?

RK: I think that it's very surprising that architecture and urbanism are always mentioned in one breath because I think that they are not only radically different things but actually opposites. I think that architecture is a desperate attempt to exercise control and urbanism is the failure of that attempt. And so, therefore, I think that this gravitation to architecture/urbanism as the same word that includes two different cores is the way that nostalgia for control is channelled towards almost forbidden domains. I think the unique thing is that we don't face a new architecture

because clearly we don't, but we do confront a condition that has never existed before, not only in its growth but also in the completely new results that the process of urbanization is creating.

Can you tell me about the issues of organization and self-organization in relation to OMA and AMO as an office/laboratory?

RK: In a way, I'm the wrong person. It's no coincidence that only former collaborators have spoken about their methods, and that I never have, partly because of an inability, but also because of my desire to maintain the right to change the method at any given time. If you see the complacency that is inevitable when knowing how things happen, even engineered accidents, engineered to a trigger, don't happen any more. So if I talk about my own recent experience, I think that there are moments which are almost random, but not quite. In the presence of a number of people who put you under a certain pressure in isolated conditions, I think it is important to work against the fact that it's isolated. It can be incredibly useful, but it can also be a process of truly horrendous stagnation. There have also been moments when it has been in a very authoritarian way or by taking models and through launching a kind of violence that things have happened. So I think that all the versions you have read are incredibly laundered, censored versions; censored in a peculiar sort of self-censorship of the things that you expect.

Like most architects, you've designed projects which weren't realized – which ones would you really like to see happen?

RK: In our case, this is deeply embarrassing because there are so many unrealized projects! But at the same time, I have my hands full with realizations, so it's a weird condition. You can look at it as a failure or as a success. I never liked the bitterness that's involved in that consideration.

Troubled cities

When was your first visit to Seoul?

RK: My first visit to Seoul was maybe six years ago. We were working for Samsung, and it was a very interesting experience because, in the first phase of the work, we were working with a *chaebol* [a conglomerate of many companies] at its most megalomaniacal, really insanely megalomaniac. I think at that point they were doing six hundred architectural projects, and this meant that there was an incredible traffic of international architects there who did not know of one another – that they were there, that they were working for the same client, what they were doing. So it was a typically unpleasant sort of architectural competition. And we were always surrounded by these kinds of phalanxes of some sort of executive assistants. And the funniest thing is that we were doing a sort of museum, with Mario Botta, Jean Nouvel and ourselves, which was a combination that had not been engineered by us but engineered by someone near the chairman, so the chairman and his wife took a particular interest in it, and at some point I needed to explain the project to the chairman. I was waiting in the Hilton Hotel, which is an incredible hotel – the level of smoothness in it is really unbelievable, it's as if you're in a dream in terms of pre-emptive service and pre-emptive comfort. But anyway, I was waiting, and then suddenly at four o'clock in the morning, there was banging on my door, and it was the same Samsung executives, who said, 'You have to see the chairman now.' And I said, 'Why at this time?' It was the first meeting. And they said, 'You have to see him now because he will be arrested at nine o'clock in the morning!' So I went, and I saw the chairman between six and eight. It was very quiet. He disclosed the whole thing; but that was also, of course, the first signal that things were going to change there. It was in a way the beginning of the crisis, when all of the endemic corruption was kind of dealt with, which showed the fragility of the whole economic structure and then its unravelling. So we made this project – it was actually a very interesting project. We had to connect the different architectures of Jean Nouvel and Mario Botta, who had started it. Our project is mostly underground: it is two volumes, on a very beautiful hill, one of those parks full of villas. And because we did not want to add another building, we made a straight slice horizontally, part of which goes

into the mountain and part of which emerges from it, so that many of the facilities are underground. It's also a museum and a cultural institution. The only mark we've left so far in Seoul is a kind of enormous underground pit dug into granite. It is in a way the most beautiful building. And what I tried to convince them to do, and maybe I can still convince them, is to leave the pit, to do something with that incredible bareness. It's just the biggest negative space you've ever seen.

Can you tell me what it is that you particularly like about Seoul?

RK: What I think is really beautiful about Seoul is that it is a city that occurred on a site where there cannot really be a city. There isn't really room for a city there. So it's as if the metropolis has been established in the middle of the mountains, a city that has to coexist with mountains and beautiful forests, a kind of 'Manhattan in the Alps'. The middle class lives in the flat parts, those who can afford everything and those who can't afford anything live on the hills. And throughout the city are scattered the remnants of this Metabolist [1960s Japanese architectural avant-garde movement] project. And I simply like the speed with which it expands. I think Korean people are the most direct in Asia; they are very raw and direct, not prisoners of politeness, and very humorous.

You mentioned that when you visited Seoul for the first time after the economic crisis, it was all of a sudden a completely different city. The city completely changed in a few days ...

RK: Yes, in a way, the future seems to be telescoping, and this exacerbates the inability I've always had to conceptualize the future as future. The future is telescoping to the point that not only can you no longer predict ten years or five years ahead but the acceleration of everything seems to make even next month completely inscrutable and unpredictable. And one of the strongest signs of this kind of acceleration is in the Asian crisis, and how the Asian crisis has had an immediate impact on urban conditions – which sometimes had only existed for three years, but in those three years there were brand-new sparkling products of the Asian economic miracle. Soaring

cities, exploding cities, then all of a sudden ... Then, while everyone here was writing about the collapse, there was already a kind of resurgence, and now the apparent gain in strength. And this whole cycle was in a way a total mystery to people in the West because nobody here grasped the speed of it, nor can anybody explain why it happened. My theory is that China saved the capitalist world by not going bankrupt and by not devaluing its currency, and that the Communist system in the end, in a very paradoxical way, came to rescue the capitalist system. That is something you never read about. And my most perfect demonstration of it is that Seoul – a city known for its eternal traffic – in the middle of the crisis, all of a sudden became this kind of eerie, silent city with no traffic: a city without pollution. And maybe that was when I could finally see that Seoul was a kind of Switzerland, really beautiful.

In previous interviews and texts, you always said that you despised futuristic-city predictions; you said that you preferred to talk about present conditions.

RK: I think anyone in their right mind should simply give it up. All you can hope for today is some kind of intelligence about day-to-day decisions. Another example, which is not as extreme as Asia, is that we've been involved in Seattle for maybe a year, and within that year, there have been major upheavals happening in the city that made it defenceless. From a kind of perfect city without any trouble, it turned into a troubled, anxious city: there was also the first major anti-capitalist demonstration since the New Deal, which traumatized the entire administration, and the fact that Microsoft, even nine months ago, was a completely vigorous, powerful, monopolistic entity that is now condemned and about to be divided, and Bill Gates, once a complete myth, is now no longer CEO, but chairman, etc. All those things are an incredible demonstration of how there is absolutely no certainty that you can count on. And the interesting thing is that the clients are trying to outwit this situation by increasingly accelerating the whole pace of architecture. The buildings we once had to build in two years we now have to build in one year. In that sense, it was a good instinct to

document in our Harvard research, in general, how fast architecture can be produced. But I could never have imagined at that time, when I discovered that some buildings in Shenzhen were produced in two afternoons on a home computer, that two or three years later we would be in the same position. But we are. And even so, we realize that we are not quick enough, or that architecture can never be quick enough.

Does this affect the lifespan of buildings?

RK: This is really interesting, actually. There is this planning project for 'La Defense Paris' we did, where we considered everything more than twenty-five years old theoretically obsolete, ready to be taken down, so that you could build a new city on the site of the old. At the time, it was considered totally visionary and an outrage. I recently had to give a presentation for the station in Rotterdam, where there will be a super-fast TGV train, and again I launched the suggestion that after twenty-five years you could simply declare buildings redundant because they are so mediocre, and this time there was a sort of barely suppressed nervous laughter. This limited lifespan of buildings is still an absolute area of blindness and real taboo in Europe.

And in America?

RK: In America, you can only say in retrospect that in many cases this is true, but you can never make it the basis of architectural production in the beginning. And this is really unfortunate because I think it could liberate an enormous amount of energy if you could be more independent vis-à-vis the lifetime of a building, and, by implication, the context. Nevertheless, we are of course contradicting ourselves when we do a public building, and we do not design it as if it will disappear in twenty-five years. But the pressure would be less if it were an automatic given that a building will exist twenty-five years at the most.

What is the relationship between slowness and speed?

RK: It remains a very strong tension. In that sense, it is a very fascinating thing to see this medium – architecture – that is now so popular but has a

sort of inherent resistance to completely following the current tendency, which is towards acceleration. It may be that that is a real conundrum for architecture, that it can accelerate, but that it also has some kind of intimate resistance, maybe more than television, film or music, and maybe that is why it is so interesting today. But it also means that we have now discovered that architecture can never reach certain speeds, and that discovery pushes us into another domain, where the same kind of thinking now has to be applied in a much more conceptual, theoretical and disembodied way.

You mentioned OMA's library project for Seattle [Seattle Public Library, 2004]. I think there is a certain relationship between the notion of the museum and the notion of the library, both often very defensive institutions, and moralistic too. Energizing these institutions evokes examples from the 1960s, for instance, Cedric Price's Fun Palace [1960–74], or the way Willem Sandberg ran the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Is this part of your personal history as well?

RK: The moment I discovered art as an independent person, as a teenager basically, coincided with the Sandberg regime. The exhibition designs completely changed the museum each time. 'Dylaby (A Dynamic Labyrinth)' [Stedelijk Museum, 1962] would now be a prophetic title again. All those shows were the kind of shows that enabled me to be more modern than my parents ... So in a way, I was kind of indoctrinated by it. And I think all of that had a big influence on my museum projects. But of course, at the same time, the museum, even in the 1960s, was a very demanding place, in the sense that it insisted on participation and was presenting issues fairly aggressively. The big difference between now and the 1960s is not only that this kind of aggression or those demands are missing in the presentations, but I think the sheer numbers are drastically changing the entire equation, limiting the things you can say and do in a museum. One of the things no curator liked about our designs for the Tate or for MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York] was the notion of creating a fast-track

tourist trajectory, a kind of short cut that would also enable the return of slowness, or intensity. In the absence of a two-speed system, the museum experience is accelerated for everybody, you can see it with the new Tate installations, not based on accumulations but on ‘juxtaposition’ – the grids by Gilbert & George next to Mondrian, a quick ‘Aha!’ and on to the next ‘rhyme’, all a form of fast-track, against complexity.

I think this is equally true for the library. Apart from all the kinds of ideologies that you could have – or launch or repeat or renew – the sheer fact of the numbers needs to be incorporated within the concept of each of these projects. You often refer to the beautiful era of MoMA, ‘the laboratory years’ – and it was a beautiful era, but I don’t think that you can have a laboratory visited by two million people a year. And that is why both our libraries and our museums are trying to organize the coexistence of urban-noise experiences and experiences that enable focus and slowness. That is, for me, the most exciting way of thinking today – the incredible surrender to frivolity and how it could also be compatible with a seduction of focus and stillness. The issue of masses of visitors and the core experience of stillness and being together with the work are what is at issue in the [Seattle] project.

Richard Hamilton recently made a text piece in the form of a badge with the text ‘Give me hard copy’. It’s actually a fragment that he extracted from Ridley Scott’s movie Blade Runner [1982]. The museum provides hard copy and the library does, too. So I was wondering how you see the role of these institutions in terms of network conditions. How do you see the relation between the actual and the virtual? How do you avoid having hierarchies between different actual libraries and virtual libraries?

RK: I think this is very interesting because in Seattle there is a library system made up of twenty-four libraries, and this is the main library. So this is already a sort of hierarchical position in itself, which assumes that the main body of the government is in the main library. And so there is all the history and routine of centralism. But of course, it is entirely networked and about

to be more networked. And what I find fascinating is that there is a lot of work going on these days by people like Judith Donath at MIT, who are looking at the internet but also at different kinds of databases as potential sources to fabricate new communities. And the irony is that, on the basis of network conditions, which are always assumed to be increasingly democratic, you can, of course, create new hierarchies. And currently the latent and almost threshold question is: ‘Does a network imply homogeneity?’ or ‘Does a network imply democracy?’ or ‘Does a network imply privacy?’ The discourse on networks has always been a disturbance to universal distribution, but I don’t see any ultimate reason why that should be the case, why its opposite potential should not be investigated. The moment at which the library will be able to connect, for instance, all the data that the readers generate – who reads which books – then that would be an incredible way of modernizing their function.

At which point the library becomes an agent, to guide people on what to read ...

RK: Yes, but there is the question of privacy. And the same for the museum. And that is why I said yesterday that it’s not only the end of the future but also the end of privacy. There’s a whole thing, like a reservoir; you feel that the wall is cracking and that you’ll simply go. And about the issue of flattening and hierarchy or value, the internet does not only have to flatten value, it can also be used to create value because you can disseminate eighty per cent, and make the next ten per cent really difficult, and the next five per cent even more difficult, and then have a core two per cent, which represents the equivalent of rare books: the rare information.

East and West

In your book S,M,L,XL [1995], there is a text on the ‘Berlin Wall as Architecture’. Can you tell me about this very first project of yours in Berlin in the early 1970s?

RK: I was a student at the end of the 1960s, the end of a period of an innocent way of looking at architecture in general. There was especially an optimism that architecture could participate in the liberation of mankind.

I was sceptical about this, and instead of going to Mediterranean villas or Greek fishing villages to ‘learn’ – as most people did at that time – I decided simply to look at the Berlin Wall as architecture, to document and interpret it, to see what the real power of architecture was. It was one of the first times that I actually went out and did fieldwork. I really didn’t know anything about Berlin and the Wall, and was totally amazed at many of the things I discovered. For example, I had hardly imagined how West Berlin was actually imprisoned by the Wall. I had never really thought about that condition, and the paradox that even though it was surrounded by a wall, West Berlin was called ‘free’, and that the much larger area beyond the Wall was not considered free. My second surprise was that the Wall was not really a single object but a system that consisted partly of things that were destroyed on the site of the Wall, sections of buildings that were still standing and absorbed or incorporated into the Wall, and additional walls, some really massive and modern, others more ephemeral, all together contributing to an enormous zone. That was one of the most exciting things: it was one wall that always assumed different conditions.

In permanent transformation.

RK: In permanent transformation. It was also very contextual because on each side it had a different character; it would adjust itself to different circumstances. It also represented a first naked confrontation with the horrible, powerful side of architecture. I’ve been accused ever since of taking an amoral or uncritical position, although personally I think that looking, interpreting, is in itself a very important step towards a critical position.

How do you feel about the disappearance of the Wall, the fact that it was completely taken down?

RK: In the early 1980s, we did a number of competitions for Berlin that anticipated the fall of the Wall, proposals for an 'Afterlife of the Wall' that made a new beginning without removing all the traces ...

The IBA building in Berlin?

RK: Yes, but it's not the current building. In an early competition, it was a much more interesting, more open situation, where walls were used to exclude the impact of the Wall. It was simply through a proliferation of walls that you could live next to the Wall. We thought that the zone of the Wall could eventually be a park, a kind of preserved condition in the entire city. I've been appalled ever since that the first thing which disappeared after the Wall fell was any trace of it. I think it is insane that such a critical part of memory has been erased, not by developers or commercial enterprises, but simply in the name of pure ideology. Really tragic. The paradox is that it now creates a completely incomprehensible 'Chinese situation'.

Can it be compared to the disappearance of the whole industrial architecture, which Hilla and Bernd Becher documented?

RK: But at least that disappeared by accident. The Wall disappeared deliberately, and in the name of History.

What do you mean by 'Chinese situation'? How would you define the Chinese city?

RK: The Chinese city for me is a city that has built up a lot of volume in a very short time, which therefore doesn't have the slowness that is a condition for a traditional sedimentation of a city, which for us is still the model of authenticity. Beyond a certain speed of construction, that kind of authenticity is inevitably sacrificed, even if you build everything out of stone and authentic materials, and that's a kind of irony. For instance, if you look at the colour of the stone of the new Berlin, it's the colour of all the worst plastics that were produced in East Germany in the 1960s. It's a kind of weird colour of pink, a weird colour of light yellow – artificial. There is

no escaping the artificial in the new architecture, and certainly not in large amounts of architecture being generated at the same time.

There is this story that everyone tells in Shanghai, according to which the mayor of Berlin was boasting about the rate of construction in his city and the mayor of Shanghai responded by saying that in Shanghai it went probably twenty or twenty-five times faster. It appears that there seems to be very little knowledge in Germany about what's going on elsewhere in terms of urban development and architecture.

RK: For me, that is the debatable thing about the Prussian style because the Prussian is either a form of *naïveté* or just a strategic claim. There is a deep ignorance in Germany about conditions outside Germany, an incredible preoccupation with the self, and therefore those kinds of misreadings occur easily. At the same time, there is something irritating about the automatic assumption of modernity, of the 'inevitability' of, or the application of, state modernism. For instance, the conversion of the Reichstag is at least as strange as the emphasis on Prussian building, because these are two forms of innocence or *naïveté*, and to think that in the Reichstag you can exorcize the spirits by means of a new sort of dome is a sort of very polite gesture and a very compromised aesthetic. It is an equally weak intellectual stand.

I remember this very strange event in 1991: there was the 'Metropolis' exhibition at the Martin-Gropius Bau, followed by a party in the former Reichstag, which was abandoned at the time. It felt very scary.

RK: That's the whole point, Berlin is very scary. And somehow, everything that tries to cover it up, either by an ersatz past or by a kind of ersatz exorcism – which is what modernity is doing – is equally implausible. I also believe that the monumental production of monuments is not going to work either, because that's part of an 'official exorcism'.

And what about the East–West relationships and exchanges? In art, there is very little exchange between Berlin and Warsaw,

Berlin and Prague ... The lack of exchange is even more evident in Vienna where Bratislava is half an hour away and there still is this wall in people's heads.

RK: I think it is related to the whole misreading: the single misreading that has a number of sub-misreadings. The idea of the encounter between East and West is still based on difference. What they don't realize is that there is no difference. They consider themselves an advanced trading post. This was incomprehensible to me when I first came, that West Berlin was sort of a satellite in the middle of East Germany, and that condition of being in the middle of another condition is something that they still do not assume completely. If you're working on this and looking at it in an architectural context, there is one group of works that you should look at, an architectural operation by Oswald Mathias Ungers, which he did when he was a professor at the TU [Technischen Universität Berlin] in the 1960s. He looked at Berlin and said, 'This is a unique situation of a city which is totally cut off and completely artificial, therefore presenting a new condition, so I'll turn it into a laboratory.' He systematically investigated the conditions of Berlin in terms of a presence of historical particles, but also the presence of the contemporary, with a very utopian, futuristic dimension. As a professor, he organized a series of design seminars, which every time posed the question of how the historical and contemporary could coexist, and how the new numbers, new programmes and the historical could coexist. For instance, he would have a year devoted to highways and plazas, or mass housing and the Brandenburg Gate. He made a very beautiful project for how to reconstruct Leipziger Platz in totally contemporary forms. That is a kind of hidden domain. People like Sawade and Kollhoff, who are now at the core of the 'Prussian' architects, were very involved in that, too. So there is an interesting ambiguity there.

There is a kind of latent modernity there: the language of the architecture was retro, but the concept of the architecture, of the urbanism, was very contemporary.

You have written that Berlin is all about memory, loss and emptiness. This is of course something Libeskind pointed out a lot, for instance, when he kept the centre in his building empty.

RK: For me, the Berlin Wall as architecture was the first spectacular revelation in architecture as to how absence can be stronger than presence. It is not necessarily connected to loss in a metaphysical sense, but more connected to an issue of efficiency, where I think that the great thing about Berlin is that it showed how entirely 'missing' urban presences or entirely erased architectural entities nevertheless generate what can be called an urban condition. It's no coincidence, for example, that the centre of Shenzhen is not a built substance but a conglomeration of golf courses and theme parks, i.e., basically unbuilt or empty conditions. And that was the beauty of Berlin even ten years ago: that it was the most contemporary and the most avant-garde European city because it had these major vast areas of nothingness.

Landing in Berlin was very beautiful, with all those gaps and holes in the urban tissue.

RK: Not only was it beautiful, but it also had a programmatic potential, and the potential to inhabit a city differently represented a rare and unique power. The irony, of course, is not only that the architecture being built is not the right architecture, but that it is built at all. It's a city that could have lived with its emptiness and have been the first European city to systematically cultivate emptiness. For Libeskind, emptiness is a loss that can be filled or replaced by architecture. For me, the important thing is not to replace it, but to cultivate it. This is a kind of post-architectural city, and now it's becoming an architectural city. For me, that's a drama, not some kind of stylistic error.

So it's not an issue of the quality of the architecture being built ...

RK: ... nor aesthetics.

I recently had a discussion with Itsuko Hasegawa, who thinks that one should advance in a city in a participatory mode, so that the users of the buildings could almost say, 'This was my idea.' This is a critique heard quite frequently in Berlin – that the city could have been built with the involvement of the people. What's your opinion?

RK: That's a very tricky question because if you ask around and do real surveys, I think the current reconstruction is very popular. The current mythology of going back to a traditional notion of plazas and streets could be a very populist platform. The other conditions – of inhabiting emptiness or living with scars and accepting the rampant and blatant oppositions of the East and West, and standing the distressed aesthetic – are much harder to grasp. The whole difficulty of participation in architecture is completely ambiguous. For instance, in the Bordeaux House [Maison à Bordeaux, 1996–8], on the one hand you could say it's extreme architecture, but on the other hand it's extreme participation.

Because it's a very strong dialogue.

RK: Yes, and therefore for participation it is not necessary for people to be able to say, 'This is my idea, this is your idea.' On the contrary, a situation arises where it becomes impossible to say whose idea it really is, either the architect's or the user's.

So it's a kind of ping-pong?

RK: Not necessarily; imagine, rather, a process in which the intelligence of others is mobilized. But it's not to establish a dogma according to assumed preferences, which I think is what's happening.

Can you tell me what gave you the idea of building the house in Bordeaux for the Lemoine family with a mobile elevator-platform?

RK: It was a house for somebody who, in the middle of his life, became handicapped and who – interestingly enough – is very courageous and

assumes that condition without any inhibitions. Therefore, it became interesting to think of a house not ‘dealing with’ that issue, but almost inspired by that issue. So basically, there are two attitudes towards the handicapped: the idea of helping them but reasoning within the possibilities that are still left, and building on the strength, which exceeds by far the idea of compensation, or helping them in such a way that the entire building makes a step forward in general. So it’s a building that is entirely based on his possibilities and not based on his impossibilities, and that has also allowed the entire family to live in that kind of logic.

Cities on the move

When first approached by the Hayward Gallery to make a design for the installation of our exhibition ‘Cities on the Move’, your proposal was to recycle other architects’ recent exhibition designs for the gallery rather than producing a single, unified scheme.

RK: I’ve always tried to be ‘economical’ with our imagination. [Kurt] Schwitters’s *Merzbau* [1925–36] was an accumulation of [urban] debris that was reassembled a number of times. Here, Ole Scheeren and I have tried first to accumulate previous Hayward designs, then to reassemble them, almost as a form of urbanism. I thought it would be nice if the show revealed a number of things about the Hayward, especially since the existence of this very building is currently under question.

You moved to London the year the Hayward opened, in 1968.

RK: Yes, lured by people like Peter Cook and Cedric Price and the thought of the architectural scene in London as some kind of huge club.

Do you remember the opening of the Hayward?

RK: Yes, of course. I mean, it was *the* event, and now I’ve lived here through all its declines and falls and resurrections. I think it’s an incredibly vital and generous space, mainly because it has never conformed to anyone’s expectation or model of what an exhibition space should be. Although

everyone always complains about it, I think the Hayward has had some of the best and most extreme exhibitions that I've ever seen.

In the Louisiana Museum, where the exhibition was presented immediately before going to the Hayward, we organized the show into a number of different typologies of cities, following the many, many interconnected spaces of the building's architecture ['Cities on the Move', Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, 1999]. You decided not to do that at the Hayward.

RK: I was worried about dispersal. The Hayward doesn't have sufficient different areas to divide the exhibition into many city typologies, and I wanted certain main points to be evident. I thought we should see whether we could compress the show into four or five cities, with a sense of introduction and some kind of compression chamber that tells you you're about to enter a continent in total upheaval and turmoil. So, in the light of the recycling of previous Hayward exhibitions' architecture, what we have done is keep the basic structure from the previous 'Patrick Caulfield' exhibition [1999], and add many of the objects that Zaha Hadid designed for 'Addressing the Century: 100 Years of Art & Fashion' [1999]. We use the same circuit as for the 'Caulfield', but we modify it, so that when you enter, there is a big arrow telling you which way to go, but there is also a smaller passage, which leads to the red-light district. We'll do newness, like airport construction, but we'll also do decay, sex and drugs, like in a real city.

You think that at present the exhibition is not sexual enough?

RK: Yes, very unsexual. I mean, given the fact that there is an enormous volume of sex tourism and that sex is one of the most important forms of transaction between people in cities, this show as it has been so far is almost oblivious to it. The problem is doing it without exoticism, and it's always difficult because of this reticence in Asia to talk about it. This I think is actually a really critical thing ...

And the architects?

RK: It is a difficult issue for architects, how to deal with such an explosive phenomenon that seems to flourish beyond individual architects. How to connect to it? We'll put all the architecture together, into a sterile room of architecture ...

A torture chamber of architecture?

RK: It's where my projects will go to ...

So there is no value judgement?

RK: No, no value judgement, and I think this will let the works contaminate each other in an interesting way.

Will there be other changes to the 'Caulfield' architecture on the ground floor?

RK: We'll make a kind of intimate streetscape with Zaha Hadid's plinths, turning them into video buildings and vitrines for icons so that one room becomes some kind of monumental alley. We'll tunnel through the corridor surrounding the ramp and put in some videos and plaster the walls with Armin Linke's installation photographs. Overhead will be Chen Zhen's bicycle/car dragon.

What about the top floor?

RK: It will be a 'commercial area' – projectors in the staircase, and we'll use another of Zaha's big vitrines to create a cinema. Then we'll have an area with things for sale, which will make us see the nearby cinema as commercial, too. And then the space will end in political protest where eggs are thrown.

You mentioned the idea of urban wallpaper.

RK: The walls of the whole ground floor should be covered with wallpaper; wallpaper of urban images, of urban realities. There will be no words, with the occasional exception of the front page of a newspaper. The wallpaper is a background, a grey presence everywhere, kind of overwhelming. That's

the whole point of cities, a nightmare in a way. An overkill. Urban overkill inside the Hayward.

Movement, colour and sound

Now that the Porto project has been realized, could you perhaps tell us about the circumstances in which it was commissioned?

RK: Well, to talk about the concert hall, I need to talk first about a house that wasn't built. We've always liked doing houses because they're just as complex as other buildings: they often take as much time and you always work with one single individual, as opposed to a state institution or business conglomerate. One day, we were approached by a Dutch client, who wanted us to design his house ... but he had three conditions that we thought were interesting. Firstly, he hated mess, so he wanted the house to have a huge amount of storage space. Secondly, he had little enthusiasm for family life, so he wanted autonomous parts of the house for each member of the family but also a space for their occasional family rendezvous. Lastly – and this was before the year 2000 – he had a morbid fear of the Y2K – technophobia!

So the project was actually born out of his acute aversions?

RK: That's right. We did a number of experiments and, from there, it became increasingly clear that with this 'aversion inventory', you'd have to eliminate the standard stylistic domains associated with home living. In the end, we developed a kind of shape that was made up of entirely negative definitions. It was the sum of everything that we couldn't do. We presented the client with the plans for his house. It was strangely hovering between ugly and beautiful: it was a volume made entirely of storage space so that he would never run out; for every single member of his family, we excavated a kind of individual grotto from the storage space, then we drilled a tunnel through the house where the family could be together if they wanted. And to make the Y2K phobia more serious, we suggested that the house should be mounted on a rotating disk, so that they could aim the

direction of the tunnel to enable them to enjoy different views more easily. Every time we presented our plans to the guy and his family they were really enthusiastic, but then two days later we'd receive a fax, asking, 'Can you not incorporate a part of my old house and shift it a little bit to this point ... and I'd like a wall in my garden.' It soon became more and more burdensome to argue with him because he couldn't make himself say yes.

What's interesting about this story is that it's related to contemporary Europe. Holland is part of a European 'trauma-core' right now – a core of Europe that's racked with fear, that's scared of taking risks, that lacks the mechanisms of improvisation

...

RK: It's tempting to say that Dutch clients are, in general, liberal, but I'm unable to say yes! It was amazing – our relationship with the client was based on negativity: his fear of running out of space, and not being sure if he wanted to live with his family members.

At around the same time, you were continuing to develop your urban research at Harvard for the 'Project for the City'.

RK: Yes, what put an extra factor in the whole Dutch house scenario was that at the same time, I was preparing for my first visit to Lagos. Being an architect, at any one time, you're dealing with up to twenty different issues in a very intense way. The fact that they're fundamentally unconnected enables you – both randomly and systematically – to find intersections. Going to Lagos was my first experience in Africa. Actually, I didn't go that time because a vaccination went wrong and I developed encephalitis, which left me more or less out of action for nine months. A curious part of encephalitis is the incredibly intense nausea that can be caused by a colour, a shape or a smell. That's how I discovered it: I was planning to do a test drive in a new sports car. When it arrived, I was so offended by the shape, it made me ill! The colour, too, was making me vomit. And then I was so disgusted by the cheap smell inside ... these were all signals. Anyway, I finally went to Africa a year and a half later: I expected some kind of

morose condition, which is what everyone really prepares you for, but I was completely surprised to discover what was an incredible daily intelligence and investment into extremely acute and immediate steps to ensure survival and progress. In Africa, an unbelievable multiplication of transactions is necessary simply to stay alive.

How did the experience in Africa affect your work in Europe?

RK: On my return from Africa, I immediately saw from the body language of the private Dutch client that his house project could never be built. At the same time, we were three weeks away from the deadline for completing designs for a concert hall in Porto. Everything came together in a blinding flash of light: I fired the client and we enlarged the house by seven times to create an entirely new design for the concert hall. The dilemma with any modern concert hall is that, for practical and acoustic reasons, the ‘shoebox’ is the best shape. In recent architecture, incredible effort has been made to render the ‘shoebox’ interesting! I realized that the tunnel we had built for his house was exactly like the shape of a shoebox; we could make the concert hall not by making a shoebox, but by eliminating the shoebox from the weird volume. It became a ‘shoebox-as-void’. After three weeks, we handed it in and won the competition.

Could you talk about your willingness to invest in local Portuguese culture?

RK: Well, the whole project had been the brainchild of a Porto-born pianist called Pedro Burmester. From the beginning, it was a very political project. During the course of its design and realization, it went through five governments: socialists, conservatives, socialists, conservatives and now it’s socialist again. A project like this always brings incredible exposure to political and economic chaos. It shows how in modern politics, continuity is almost impossible and how each decision-making body validates itself by undermining the previous board’s decisions. In the case of a building, things become incredibly complex: once started, you can’t really cancel the whole thing because it would be seen to be turning down change and opportunity.

So the city's Casa da Música became hugely symbolic in terms of local politics. The other thing was that Porto has a very strong tradition of local architectural practice, so we tried to define a complementary relationship with it.

You also used a local designer for all the furniture.

RK: In a country that's not entirely modern, we wanted craft. Furniture was one of the hardest elements of this project because it always looks new. That's why we worked with Daciano da Costa, a famous furniture designer from the 70s, because his furniture looks beautiful yet awkward and not so eager to please; it's a very beautiful kind of baroque 70s modernity. He had designed red velvet sofas, gold-coloured aluminium couches: very interesting furniture which suggests communality but also a very strong personal identity.

Could you tell us about how you approached the scientific exploration of the acoustics of the space?

RK: A concert hall with two huge windows on both sides was obviously going to result in complications! Large flat glass panes would have ruined the sound. Because they were folded and corrugated for sound, they could also act as a structure: a fifteen-metre wall of glass without vertical supports. This building is not containing the event inside, but projecting it outside, on to the city. At the same time, all the spaces inside are visually connected so that, as far as I know, it is the only concert hall where you can see, and to some extent participate in, three concerts going on at the same time.

I think what's interesting is the missing relationship between composers and architects. I was wondering in what way your dialogue with the world of music and composing had somehow been enhanced by this experience.

RK: Well, Pedro Burmester had a precise and sophisticated vision of all the kinds of music that had to be able to be performed here. So it wasn't about

the typical kind of modern slickness where, for commercial reasons, you don't want to miss a single audience. It was more the sum of different audiences that were important to the city and that needed to be connected to the enterprise. It was a really social project, a unifying entity.

Have you been involved in any previous projects where you were working with a composer or a sonic architect?

RK: Well, we did a club in The Hague three years ago called the Trojan Horse, which is a very robust and popular venue for pop concerts. That kind of 'real influence' is so unusual today. When you talk about engaging with a composer, or about genuine cross-disciplinary dialogue, I don't know why that would be so weird today; I guess that everyone's locked in their own respective identity, and at the same time, we have become similar, with the same tastes, information, issues. I think that we pay lip service to interdisciplinary acts – the act of creating a concert hall is an unbelievably intense integration of engineering, it works inside the team, but not as an encounter.

We've yet to speak about your relationship to sound. I was wondering whether you listen to much music and whether you go to many concerts. Were there any musical moments that were illuminating or really struck you?

RK: When I was young, I used to go to see Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Thelonius Monk at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Now I listen to music and go to concerts, but in a completely unsystematic way; basically, there is nothing interesting to say about it. I go to classical music; I go to contemporary music. Any parent has many musical lives.

RICHARD HAMILTON

I got to know Richard Hamilton around 1999. I was working on an exhibition at the Sir John Soane's Museum in London, called 'Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow' (a title by Douglas Gordon). Hamilton contributed to the exhibition, installing a Marcel Duchamp, creating a related painting and designing a poster and postcard for the show. Later, we met near Oxford with Rita Donagh. The conversation never stopped and led to a number of collaborations on projects and exhibitions.

Small is beautiful

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *You've talked about 'freeing the spectator from the monocular cage'. In which museum spaces do you feel that this is achieved?*

RICHARD HAMILTON: I find myself critical of almost every museum space I have ever been in. When I first visited the Richard Meier museum in Barcelona, MACBA [Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996], I thought it absolutely appalling that an architect should present this to the art world as a place to exhibit paintings. He seems to have done such perverse things. There are glass bricks placed in the floor and at the bottom of the walls, so illumination comes from below. The biggest space on each of the three floors is circular. Why he thought that an artist might wish to see their paintings hanging on a concave wall is a mystery to me. Not only are there concave walls but there are also pillars in front of the curved walls at very uncomfortable locations. The whole building is a disaster, and I said I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole. Now I find that I am going to have a show there next year ['Introspective', 2003]. But only because Vicente Todoli is going to curate it, and because Manuel de Borja-Villel, the director, has done wonders to suppress the architecture. He has done things that make it usable, but only by redesigning the building inside – not the circular walls yet, I'm afraid. Many architects have failed at the task of producing museums suitable for hanging pictures.

Are there any museum buildings you admire?

RH: The building that is most criticized from the point of view of its dominance over the art it houses is New York's Guggenheim Museum. But that is one of the few buildings I do admire. It's a great building. It even has advantages for the presentation of art, in spite of the fact that the back walls

are concave. Somehow the spiral progression of bays invites a chronology, and seeing one or two paintings at a time is a great advantage to my mind.

You have said that you think that many of the really important paintings are not necessarily monumental.

RH: Art has been subject to the influence of gigantism. Things have to be big. It was said during the 1950s that American artists were planning large pictures as a result of spending too much time in the cinema. The new paintings were filling the field of vision, and that was their justification. I accepted that this might be interesting, but as time went by I began to be a little concerned that vast areas of space were being taken up by things that, because they are abstract, have no scale that relates to human beings. They are decorative in content and have no subject other than themselves. The museums that accommodate them are designed from this point of view. They glorify the architect, and the paintings which fill them are designed to decorate that architectural fantasy.

And now, we are in a new phase of gigantism where everything sculptural has to be large. So you get *The Angel of the North* [Antony Gormley, 1998], the Angel of the fucking North standing proud over the motorway, and its main claim to fame and virtue is the fact that its wingspan is that of a Boeing 747. Should we believe that if you blow up a child's toy, an anatomical, educational device, two hundred times full size, that art will inevitably result? I don't go along with this theory. You can blow up a Moulinex food grinder and expect the same consequence of wonder. This tendency was begun by a good friend of mine, Claes Oldenburg, who produced works like this in the first place as concepts, ideas. A giant ball cock going up and down in the Thames made a treasured postcard, but it was not essential that this lovely thought become a sculpture. But then, corporations took it up and it wasn't long before you might meet an enlarged common object on a plaza anywhere. I was very sympathetic to the ideas of Dieter Roth, who said that American art was heavyweight: like Joe Louis and what goes on in a boxing ring. Isn't there a place for bantamweight? Roth liked to see himself as a bantamweight.

This idea is interesting in relation to the museum. The Duchampian idea of the box and the portable museum.

RH: Yes, I hadn't thought of it in that context, but it is true.

Small is OK.

RH: And if black is beautiful, small can also be beautiful. I've often been interested in the possibility of engaging with an object at its true scale. When I was making a picture about a couple, I took as my example *The Arnolfini Marriage* [1434] by Van Eyck. I decided that I would use exactly the dimensions of his panel. Then came the realization that the Van Eyck is quite small in scale. This monumental work, that is to say monumental in the mind, is surprisingly small.

There not only seems to be a tendency towards gigantism on the one hand, but there also seems to be discrimination against small work.

RH: If it is small and dense that is regarded as worse than just being small. If there is more to think about, if there is text as well as an image that is going to force the mind into activity, this is seen as a black mark.

And what did you think when you saw the Blake exhibition at Tate Britain [‘William Blake’, 2000]?

RH: I was overwhelmed by it in a way. Overwhelmed in that it revealed much more than I had known of William Blake. I saw pictures that I didn't know existed. Some of them I found to be extraordinarily beautiful. The trouble with his paintings is that he was not a very good chemist, so there really is a drastic deterioration in the quality of the paint itself. It is because he succumbed to the use of bitumen in the paint. It is something that happened with [J. M. W.] Turner also. You can't fight it. No restorer is ever going to get Blake's paintings back to what they were; one has to accept them as being, to some extent, a ghost of their original glory. But one or two of the paintings revealed the wonder of his original genius.

The other thing that I found fascinating about the exhibition was the fact that he was a great technician, one of the great printers, and I have an interest in printmaking. Hercules Seghers was one of the earliest great etchers at the time of Rembrandt. Blake was in that class with Hercules Seghers; they were among the first printmakers to work with colour, and that was very early. The greatest art is often produced by people who are inventing a new technology. It was true of Van Eyck. His family invented oil paint. That need to create the technology, the chemistry that can provoke great art. The two things often go together.

Are artists engineers to a certain degree?

RH: No, not necessarily. I think that a great artist has a vision to do something and he finds the technical means to do it. If the technical means do not already exist he will invent it as a chemist or an engineer might, but it is the vision that comes first, not the practical skills or an education with a technological background. Of course with someone like Leonardo [da Vinci], the dividing line is very narrow. I don't know whether he started off with an interest in anatomy and went off to produce a painting like the *Mona Lisa* [c.1503–6]. I like to think the artist led the scientist.

Could you expand on your interest in installations?

RH: Installation has always been very much on my mind as part of the process of art creativity. And I have often been involved with the installation of other people's work as well as my own. I worked in commercial exhibitions, not designing the structures or anything of that sort, but making models. I spent a lot of time in places like the annual British Industries Fair. This was after the war when I was in my early twenties. I used to make models partly to get money to help my studies. You don't need anything more than a razor blade, balsa wood and some glue. With minimal means you could make an industry.

You are talking about models of exhibitions?

RH: Both models of exhibitions and models within exhibitions. I made a model of a piece of oversized soap once!

That was before the show 'Growth and Form' [Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1951]?

RH: Yes. I think it was in 1935 to 1936; it began in the display department at the Reimann studios [The Reimann School and Studios of Industrial and Commercial Art, London], going to exhibition stands and putting up lettering I had cut on a treadle fretsaw in the studio. I didn't do any designing of course, but I was in contact with some very good designers because the Reimann studios, a slightly commercialized version of the Bauhaus, had to move from Germany in the early 1930s and they started up in London. I was fortunate to get a job there in 1935, a year before I went to the Royal Academy at the age of sixteen.

Did this exiled version of the Bauhaus have the interdisciplinary spirit of the actual Bauhaus?

RH: It was based on the idea that very high-quality practitioners were working in a practical environment and teaching when appropriate. That is to say, there were commercial studios for display, fashion, graphic design, photography, etc., with very good people engaged in commissioned projects. And there were separate teaching studios. A teacher could overlap into teaching students who wouldn't be doing commercial work in the studio; I was an employee, a tea boy almost. I did a certain amount of work and I learned a great deal. But the main quality of the place for me was that I met people who were very good in their field.

I was taken up by a stage designer called Professor Haas-Heye. On one occasion he gave me a shilling and told me to go and see the Picasso exhibition at the Burlington Gallery ['Picasso's *Guernica* with 67 Preparatory Paintings, Sketches and Studies', New Burlington Galleries, London, 1938], then a large space behind the Royal Academy. There was *Guernica* [1937] filling a wall, surrounded by many *Guernica* studies and dozens of his weeping-woman paintings. It was a life-changing experience

for me, for a sixteen-year-old. The people I worked with were not only bright, but had all left Germany, and therefore were likely to be left wing, which helped my political education too.

In a text you wrote about design exhibitions, which you criticize, you mention a whole list of exhibitions as counter-examples. You refer to the Great Exhibition of 1851 that produced some display features of historical importance in manipulating interior space. Then you cite highlights of experimental modern exhibition history. Why were you acquainted so early with this history that today seems to have succumbed to amnesia?

RH: I suspect that the text you are referring to was my response to a questionnaire for a special issue of a design magazine called *FoB+ 10* sent to a number of people in 1961, ten years after the 1951 Festival of Britain. I had written odd pieces for the magazine. I wasn't very interested in architecture as a practice, but I was interested in interiors. I had the opportunity as a student, having earned some money in the 1951 Festival of Britain making models, to get a mortgage and build a house. I was already thinking about designing interior spaces even if I wasn't too concerned with the exterior (that was what architects did). In 1951 I had proposed and designed 'Growth and Form', the ICA's contribution to the Festival of Britain. It was very natural because of my interest in Le Corbusier and some of the other people you have mentioned.

What was particularly novel about the experience of exhibition as a medium was to learn about a form that requires movement of the spectator in space. There are other experiences you can have: you can sit on a chair in a cinema watching a moving image projected on to a screen; you can read a book; you can absorb information in many different ways. But exhibitions present information in such a way that the audience is required to move within it rather than have it directed at the static spectator.

I wondered a lot about this, which culminated in an exhibition I did with Victor Pasmore in 1957 called 'An Exhibit' [Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, and Institute of Contemporary Arts, London]. I had begun to understand that

there were certain things that could be done in space that were hard to visualize, hard to understand or to work with at the level of plan and elevation. Plan and elevation are the tools that architects had to understand space from time immemorial. Architects had to work on the plan, the distribution of the space on a plane, then the elevations of the walls. This restriction to rectilinear planes and what could happen on them rather distracted one from the possibility of understanding the space as a whole. As soon as it came to paper, putting down the information and drawing, it comes back to 2D, plan and elevation. And so, I speculated about [Antoni] Gaudí and thought he could not have produced what he had done if he had not moved around in the space and made decisions in it.

The most glorious architectural space I know, the Parthenon, is the result of somebody moving around that space and finding the buildings. The quality of the Parthenon is that it is a group of buildings that are so sublimely related that they supersede the qualities of any individual building or any individual piece of sculpture that might have been put on them.

The elements in 'An Exhibit' were suspended. How did the system work?

RH: I devised a system where we could hang Plexiglas sheets of standard size anywhere within a 3D grid of one foot, eight inches. So, the possibility of hanging the sheets vertically, horizontally, and at right angles to each other was almost infinite. The exhibition had no subject. It was self-referential, in the Frank Stella sense of the term. I became aware that it would be impossible to conceive the relationships in the normal way of plan and elevation; it had to be created progressively in the space itself, moving from one element to another. Once the first mark was made, by putting a plane in that space, it led to the consequence of placing a second plane, and so on. The whole thing had to develop organically.

It was related to an idea that I had when I was at the Slade [Slade School of Fine Art, London] in 1951 to 1952. I was making paintings and trying to be minimalist about it. I said to myself, 'If you take a rectangle and put a

mark on it, that point is related to the edges or to the corners and that first mark will affect everything subsequent to it.’ The first choice is the rectangle, the boundaries, then a single mark, and then the next mark has to relate to that initial statement and its position in the rectangle. The little painting of mine in the Tate Gallery collection called *Chromatic Spiral* [1950] was done on entirely that basis. I was subjecting the same principles to space in ‘An Exhibit’. But the first exhibitions like ‘Growth and Form’ [1951] and ‘Man, Machine and Motion’ [1955] were quite different in that they were very didactic and had a theme. ‘Growth and Form’ was about natural form, an area of study dominated by D’Arcy [Wentworth] Thompson, the great morphologist. Having looked at the natural world, I moved on to ‘Man, Machine and Motion’, which was about man and his place in that natural world – what man had done to modify his physical abilities with devices to enable him to move through air or water, or on land at high speed, to improve the capabilities of the human body, in other words, to outdo Darwin.

The ability of the viewer to generate his or her own compositions mattered to you very much. Could one also say, in a Duchampian way, that in ‘An Exhibit’ the viewer completed the work?

RH: Having devised a system, and having been involved in the placing of the elements, I was perfectly happy to leave Victor Pasmore, my collaborator, to proceed with the part in the process that Lawrence Alloway called individualization. The reason that we did ‘An Exhibit’ at all was that Victor Pasmore had come to me and said, ‘Wouldn’t it be interesting to do an exhibit together?’ He said, ‘I liked your “Man, Machine and Motion” show very much but I didn’t like the photographs.’ His interest was in the formal relationship of planes, but he couldn’t bear the idea of information being presented on these planes. I found this opinion interesting and thought, ‘What if you took all of the photographs away? If it was just a question of placing planes in a relationship?’ I went back to him and made a proposal that I could design a system that we could use to distribute these planes in any location we wished. He could individualize the panels afterwards. I

realized that I would be uncomfortable about adopting his familiar forms and sticking them on and I didn't think that two people could make a work of art, in the sense of giving it that individualization. He liked what happened and wanted more, so we did another version, freestanding and a lot easier to construct, called 'Exhibit 2' [1959]. I suggested that instead of him individualizing it, that we could try doing that together, but we would need to have an anonymous form of accents or punctuation rather than his characteristic forms. The idea was that in the poster/catalogue, in Alloway's words: 'The meaning of "An Exhibit" is now dependent on the decisions of visitors, just as, at an earlier stage, it is dependent on the artists who are the players. It is a game, a maze, a ceremony completed by the participation of the visitor.'

To go beyond the signature of the artist?

RH: Yes. I suggested that we use a limited number of self-adhesive coloured tapes. Then it would be a question of tearing off a piece of tape and putting it down. First you put tape on something over there, and that might suggest another touch somewhere else. It seemed to me to be extending the processes that we had gone through with the placing of the panels. The elements were neutral or anonymous.

George Kubler, who in his seminal book, The Shape of Time [1962], introduces time into art history, writes: 'We have shifting relations, passing moments, and changing places in historic life. For the shapes of time we need a criterion that is not only advanced by analogy from the biological sciences. Biological time consists of uninterrupted durations of statistically predictable length, while historical time is intermittent and variable, and the intervals between an action and its beginnings are indeterminate.' How much did this text on 'Growth and Form' have to do with time and introducing time into exhibitions?

RH: What astonished me about D'Arcy Thompson's view of morphology was that I was attracted to it at all. I never read Darwin, although I am sure

Darwin's books are fascinating, masterpieces as well, but Thompson's book [*On Growth and Form*, 1917] interested me because it was approaching form from a mathematical point of view. It opened my eyes to the possibility that the world is as it is because it had to be that way in order to follow certain mathematical principles. A horn on an animal grows the way it does because the relationship of the growth of this hard material in the soft material of its body produces a kind of history of its growth; the tip is small because that grew first and then the secretion continues, enlarging it bit by bit, in the same way that an oyster shell has cavities that get larger and larger as the animal itself gets larger and larger. The spirals on a cauliflower show a diagram describing the phenomenon of its growth so perfectly that you see that it has to be this way because time and growth are related.

The most beautiful thing I remember from Thompson is an explanation for life. I can only paraphrase it. An organism starts as a single, spherical cell, this cell splits into two, and these divide into four, then eight and sixteen and thirty-two and sixty-four and it goes on and on until it has achieved the appropriate number of cells. This ball of cells rotates and assumes another form and it gets a concavity in much the same way that a thumb pushed into a ball of clay makes a pot. It tends to go into that shape. Then it becomes cylindrical and the cells take on different forms and functions depending on where they happen to be on the organism. The depression will become a hole, and then excrescences will come out of the sides of this tube and you end up with a creature with a mouth, an anus, and four limbs. That this procedure should develop into something as complex as a human being with a mind is so magical. One of the mysteries and beauties of existence is that it should in all its variety produce this extraordinary creature, humanity.

Is this how Thompson describes it?

RH: Sort of, it is my simplification. His theory of transformation was regarded by scientists to be his most important contribution. He noticed that certain animal skulls were related to each other. He drew one of these skulls

on a regular grid and then, by deforming the grid, by bending and or stretching it, he could produce the shapes of other species. From this he was able to make a table. If there is a related sequence, with a gap, and then perhaps a bigger gap, it was likely that other creatures had existed which would have a skull shaped like his missing shape, so he would fill that gap. His theory was proven by predicting forms before the event of discovery. It was like the atomic table: the numbers were known before the atom was observed. I found it fascinating that there could be that kind of relationship. The fact that I didn't go to school to be informed about these things meant that when books were brought to my attention I would get as much out of them as I could; I didn't need another individual to disclose the magic. The printed word was enough for me.

*Let's talk more about the 'Man, Machine and Motion' exhibition.
When I read your text about the exhibition and you spoke of the
devices which man makes to extend his physical potential, I
thought about cybernetic ideas of the time.*

RH: No, I think that was my own idea. The Natural History Museum was a place I had gone to quite often with [Eduardo] Paolozzi and [Nigel] Henderson. They loved fossils, and it influenced their work, the look of their work. Paolozzi in particular created reliefs that looked like the sort of thing that you might find in a natural history museum in a cabinet labelled 'fossils' of a certain period. If I was at the Victoria & Albert Museum, I would probably be alone, perhaps looking at Graeco-Roman tapestries or spending days looking at etchings in the Print Room. To have a box of Rembrandt etchings in your hands for a few hours is a wonderful experience.

You are an autodidact?

RH: Yes. I cannot think why I was attracted to the museums, but I was. These three museums in South Kensington – the Natural History Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Science Museum, with their different areas of interest: art, nature, science and engineering – became

very important to me. Spending a lot of time as a child in the Science Museum made me interested in how things work; as a child I loved to see the steam engines in showcases. You press a button and the pistons start reciprocating, and then you went on to the next one and turned a handle and something else happened. It was one of the great rewards of going to the Science Museum. There was quite an emphasis on locomotion, cars and aeroplanes hanging down in the Great Hall, and so on. But I was also affected by other sources: advertising in American magazines, like a football team lined up behind a Pontiac or a Cadillac, or a girl in a bathing costume lying on the bonnet of a car.

Man-and-machine hybrids?

RH: Yes. I began to accumulate these things and decided that it might make an exhibition. I was interested in the form of exhibition as such – not that I felt particularly that man and motion needed to be presented to the public, but simply that I thought it would make an exhibition that would have a visual interest and it would enable me to exploit my skills as a designer of structures that present information.

An exhibition that we haven't mentioned yet is the most cited one, 'This is Tomorrow' at the Whitechapel Art Gallery [1956]. You had a team situation with an architect, a painter and a sculptor. How did the idea for the exhibition come about, and your contribution in particular?

RH: It came about at a time when the Independent Group [pioneers of pop art in the UK] was on the verge of extinction. I think the Independent Group started in 1953–4, but it had already become much more open as a platform to present ideas to the public rather than an introverted group. Theo Crosby, who was editor of a magazine called *Architectural Design*, was very involved with an international body, the Architectural Congress, in Paris around 1954, and the idea had been presented that architects, painters and sculptors should all get together.

It was an interdisciplinary scene?

RH: It had something to do with that. Back in London, Theo Crosby called a meeting, a party, and we went there to hear Theo say, 'We could make an exhibition. The plan is to form groups, an architect, a painter and a sculptor; go away and talk amongst yourselves, and decide who you want to work with.'

Were the groups self-organized? They weren't imposed by the curator?

RH: That was the idea. It was a strange occasion. It was very clear to John McHale and myself that we would like to work together, and then it was the question of finding an architect. I knew John Voelcker slightly and liked him very much, so we asked him if he would join us. Unfortunately, shortly after that evening, after we had a few discussions about what we might do, John McHale informed us that he was due to take up the scholarship he had been offered at Yale. He went off to America and stayed there until a few weeks before the exhibition was to open in England. We only corresponded by letter, and things became very acrimonious. So, finally, we were no longer friends. I think that happened in a good number of the groups. But, the ideas were certainly mutual, the ideas of what we might do in the space, apart from the actual execution of it. We were pretty much agreed that it should represent the kinds of things that we had been talking about at the Independent Group, what we called pop art, pop music, cinema and all of those other things that you see in a list whenever the words 'pop art' are mentioned. John McHale was very interested in optical matters – he had read all about it in books and knew it more deeply than I did – Gestalt psychology and all of the rest. When it came to the point, I took a few ideas from McHale and had to incorporate them into the exhibition. John Voelcker designed the structure.

What he called the 'Fun House'. It's funny because it made me think of Cedric Price's Fun Palace. Was there a link?

RH: Not that I know of. This extraordinary construction that John Voelcker devised was low and wide at the front and very high and narrow at the back.

It was like a wedge, but a wedge that worked both vertically and horizontally. It was placed so that it made a narrow corridor along a sidewall, an area of visual illusion. The whole space around the pavilion used introverted spatial clues. The idea was that there are certain things that were new in our visual environment, such as cinema, the jukebox, Marilyn Monroe and *Forbidden Planet* [1956], etc. All these popular-culture images were related or contrasted with each other so the way that we saw things could be informed by straightforward visual illusions. A few of the visual illusions were taken from books, but many were made in the treatment of the space.

Visual distortions?

RH: Yes. The kind of experience to be found in the Marcel Duchamp Rotoreliefs we had running. They're an optical illusion. Marcel always found it wonderful that this should be a monocular spatial illusion – it doesn't depend on stereoscopy. These two themes, the new pop culture and the optics that presented it to us, were put together and presented in as dramatic and exciting a way as possible. The jukebox was running continuously, and people could make a choice. They didn't have to put a shilling or a sixpence in the machine, and this resulted in such constant use of the machine that no one got what they wanted because the choice might be playing an hour or two later. We also had a microphone in the last of the several chambers within the structure. A microphone on the wall with a balloon saying 'Speak Here'. People would speak into it, but they didn't know there was a loudspeaker in the front of Voelcker's cabinet broadcasting what was said. Near a life-size cut-out of Marilyn Monroe was a giant Guinness bottle: when you saw it from the front it reinforced this spatial disparity. There was a space capsule with a fluorescent Jackson Pollock on the floor and portholes on the wall from science-fiction movies that showed aliens looking through the windows. All these little games with sound, optical illusion and imagery.

SANAA

I met Kazuyo Sejima in 1996 while doing research for the 'Cities on the Move' exhibition which I co-curated with Hou Hanru. I was travelling across Asia for the show, and we met in Japan. I had been asking young architects who I should meet, and Araza Isozaki mentioned Sejima. I met her in her studio, which was full of weightless architectural maquettes. Defying gravity, they were incredibly playful and striking. She is now best known as half of SANAA, the architectural practice she founded in 1995 with Ryue Nishizawa, and is one of the leading architects of today.

Our second encounter was in 2008 at the Yokohama Triennial. I went to see her with the artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss and we worked together on the show 'Mutations', with her designing the materials in Japan, and on a Serpentine Pavilion with Julia Peyton-Jones in 2009. In 2010 she was asked to curate the Architecture Biennale in Venice, and she invited me to interview people there. What was interesting about her curatorship was that she herself didn't design, she let the artists design it, as she invited me to interview people who came to the show. What she did design was a room especially for the interviews, with chairs that looked like rabbits.

Itineraries

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *I thought that we should begin at the beginning. I would like to know how your collaboration began, what were the early stages, the first impulses?*

RYUE NISHIZAWA: Originally, I worked in the office of Ms Sejima, and in 1995 I wanted to start up my own office. We began to talk, and we agreed to set up the SANAA office together. At the time there was a competition for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia. We wanted to enter, and we thought that it would be a good idea to submit a joint proposal. So at first we started to collaborate in an informal way. Then we won the competition. Unfortunately the project was cancelled, so it never came to light, but eventually we won other competitions and SANAA continued to be active.

I'd also be curious to know which architects or designers from the past have inspired you?

KAZUYO SEJIMA: Of course there are a great many, but it would be difficult to say which one has inspired me the most. I could mention Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or, more recently, Toyo Ito and Rem Koolhaas.

This leads us to the question of the museum. At the beginning of your collaboration, there were principally houses. Over the last few years you have refocused on museums, including some that weren't realized. I'm curious to know how the museum came into your life.

KS: I continue to make designs for individual houses, but at the same time I also do museums. What I find interesting with museums is that they have a public dimension; they have the capacity to offer a new public space. In

general it's what the public asks for. For example, if I don't know what to do as a tourist in an unknown city, I begin by going to the local museum. This triggers something; it creates a new opening. The museum also has a pedagogical function for schoolchildren. It can be open to all kinds of people. Of course, museums have an artistic mission: to exhibit artworks. That's the basis of any museum. But for those who don't necessarily have access to an artistic culture, going to a museum is a chance for them to discover something. Even if they don't necessarily manage to talk to other people, there's still some kind of communication. I have the impression that it's what is expected of the museum nowadays. In any case, it's what I have in mind. I think that there are all kinds of museums that have an artistic vocation, but I think that there are still these common points that make museums interesting.

In relation to your museum projects, could you tell us a little about the relationship between form and content?

RN: There's a very important relationship between content and form. What's understood by content is the 'programmes': how people are going to make use of the museum. So there's the form and the way it's used by human beings: there's necessarily a relationship. For example, there are some very large rooms, others that are very small and, in each case, the character of the artworks changes. There's this relationship between the content and the form that I think is one of the interesting themes of architecture. Interesting content generates an interesting architecture and vice versa. There's an interaction; each gives a new meaning to the other. This phenomenon can be observed in houses as well as museums.

Kazuyo mentioned the public aspect of the museum. This is something that is particularly fascinating in the experience of visiting [the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art,] Kanazawa [Japan], where everything is connected to everything. It's not a continental museum; it's more of an archipelago museum. There are all these laboratories, joined together by corridors. You once told me that you were interested in the

freedom of the connection, the public space that exists between these laboratories ...

RN: When we did the designs for the museum, I became aware of the remarkable character of artworks. In other words, when one wants to build a museum, one of the important goals is to create an emotion in the visitors. All sorts of people go into museums. Of course, one can talk of a museum, but one could also talk of a park, of a place that is open to everyone. So one creates an adventure, an experience; then afterwards the people return home. In this respect, the fact that there are gaps, shifts between the different spaces, makes it possible to create an itinerary between those different spaces. It's not so much the author of the spaces that creates the itinerary: each visitor creates his or her own, different and specific itinerary. It is very much a democratic approach to the museum. It's both a museum and a park. It can also be an urban space. That's what we have in mind when we design a museum.

Another museum project is your unrealized project for Rome. I would like to ask you to tell us about that since I think there are very interesting links to be made with the new project: this idea that you have made many spaces public that are normally not public, notably the storage area.

RN: This was a relatively early project, and also one that wasn't selected, so there was no further development. What I can remember about it is that the site contained all kinds of historical buildings that could either be destroyed or included. That was the offer made to us. We decided that the various historical buildings should be preserved, by covering them with glass, for example, to ensure that the buildings as well as the art objects became exhibited objects.

Inside the existing buildings there were exhibition spaces that incorporated the building itself. However, since they were single-storey buildings, one went from building to building, so there was an aspect that

was quite simple. The different elements were enclosed in one another like Russian dolls: boxes within boxes.

This leads us to the question of artists. Contemporary artists often love your work and are inspired by it. What kind of dialogue do you have with contemporary art? Luisa Lambri told me that she works with you a lot; she's an artist with whom you have an intense dialogue.

RN: Luisa Lambri is a wonderful artist, with a remarkable vision of architecture. She's one of the artists that we admire the most. This has inspired us and we hope one day in the future, if we have the opportunity, to design a building together. We are often saved by artists in difficult moments, which is to say that art creates space. In this respect, we really have a great deal of admiration for artists. So far we've collaborated with Walter Niedermayr, James Turrell and Michael Lin, not only in exhibition spaces but also on original projects.

KS: Exhibition spaces are especially difficult. What I mean by that is that the architecture shouldn't be too visible. At the same time it's also not enough if it is only a backdrop. It's necessary to consider the relationship between the display and the exhibited objects properly. It's not a straightforward task. But one of the experiences that we drew from Kanazawa, from one of the galleries that we designed to be used by artists, is that the space itself assumes a different dimension depending on the art inside. For example, if one installs a very small object in a very large room, one feels that object more strongly. Or sometimes the space can seem packed. Of course, nothing changes at the level of architecture, the dimensions remain fixed, but a new space is born each time. The possibility of having an optimal collaboration with an artist is a unique experience.

RN: In the history of architecture, when one looks back at the collaboration between architecture and the fine arts, it seems to me this was something that was unified right from the beginning. For example, when one looks at ancient Japanese buildings like Hōryō-ji, a single pillar, it's already a work

of art. It can serve as a container for a statue of Buddha, but at the same time there are extremely precise decorations on the building. In other words, art and architecture cannot be separated. And when one looks at European architecture it's the same. In this respect, the human being, in a subconscious way, establishes a very close proximity between architecture and the fine arts.

That brings us to an aspect of your work that's relatively unknown and undocumented: exhibition design. You have conceived exhibitions for yourselves, to exhibit your own works. I'm thinking for example of the wonderful Japan Pavilion for the Venice Biennale a few years ago [2000]. There are also your recent projects. On the one hand, there's a project that's in preparation for the Mies Pavilion in November of this year, but there's also an exciting project for Naoshima that's linked to the world of exhibitions. I would also like to know more about the evolution of your project at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo last year, which is a sort of invisible architecture.

KS: You mentioned Naoshima, but there's an island close by, Inujima, that is even smaller, which is also part of the same Benesse Art Site project. The work on the Inujima Art House project began last spring. There are several points of comparison with the Louvre-Lens project [France, 2012]. It's not a mining area, it's a small island, but there are quarries on the island that are no longer in use, where little pools have formed. There are only about fifty inhabitants. The average age is well over seventy. The idea was to do something to try to preserve this island: if nothing changed, then the island would soon have no one living on it. There are a few traditional houses, about fifty; some are vacant. We had the idea of renovating them to create galleries. To replace those that are semi-ruins, or on empty sites, we added other, new, exhibition spaces. You can do a complete tour of this little island in about twenty minutes, but there are very beautiful landscapes surrounded by the sea, and the ancient quarries that have become pools. You can see the mountain, the sea and these pools, and visit traditional houses transformed

into galleries. Ancient traditional landscapes renovated very slightly to create new landscapes.

And your project for the Mies Pavilion [Spain, 2008]?

RN: Mies is one of the architects that we most respect. It's the project that presented us with the most difficulties. In fact we want to exhibit sculptures, rather than do exhibition design. These sculptures mustn't disturb Mies – we're going to pay particular attention to this point. It's not so much an exhibition design; we are really participating as artists.

KS: When we talk about exhibition design, we always bear in mind that in the museum, artwork and exhibition space do not have a stable relationship independent from the rest of the museum. For example, when the visitor wanders through the rooms of the exhibition, there's occasionally a superimposition between the two types of space.

I would like to ask you about memory, and the extent to which what Eric Hobsbawm calls a 'protest against forgetting' is important to you.

RN: Rather than talking about memory, we prefer to use the term 'history'. It's something that evokes more. Often, when we build new buildings, there are already earlier structures next to these. This could well be the pre-existing site, for example, or even the topography of the site. So to design a new building is to create a meaning within the flow of history. It's not so much to appreciate the architecture, but rather to gain a general understanding of a given environment. It's the same thing in the case of a house. In the case of Essen, or for the Louvre-Lens project, we were in a specific context: a history shared by a large population. Faced with that history, it's a problem that's even more important. To say that history is important isn't simply about letting the old survive, but also about adding something new. Thanks to this existing history we're able to know much more about the meaning of the present, and are able to reflect on it. And we're able to add something contemporary. This is what we call a project.

Another question is that of time. Often when we talk about museums, we talk about spaces. Édouard Glissant – a great writer, philosopher, poet – speaks of resisting homogenization, not only of space, but also of time, at a moment when the forces of globalization are so strong. I would like to know more about the timeline that we saw in your magnificent project this evening. As we have seen, this is a timeline gallery that links all kinds of things from 4000 BC to the end of the nineteenth century.

KS: I don't know whether I can properly answer this question. When one lines up these objects, the visitor is able to become conscious of the flow of time. When I go to particular places, what I feel is not simply the space, but also its temporal dimension. In this space and this environment, we feel the non-homogeneity of time, which is to say that the flow of time in this space or this environment has a different quality. On the site of the Louvre-Lens I had the impression of being on an island. This reflects the kind of time that flows there, the temporal flux specific to the place. In the space of the Time Gallery, there will be so many different dimensions of time. I am looking forward to being able to enter this room as a visitor.

All my thanks for all these answers. Now it's time to answer two or three questions from the floor.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: I would like to return to this idea of time, because I have the impression that an architect and a landscape architect do not operate according to the same timescale. I'm thinking particularly about the history of Japanese architecture, where the temporality of a building isn't the same. We don't have the same notion of time in European culture. Does this notion of time, which is necessarily shorter for the architect, whatever his history, have an influence on the genesis of Louvre-Lens?

RN: I think that there are all kinds of examples that one could mention. For example, the Ise Shrine, the most venerated of shrines, a Shinto shrine, which is very important in Japan. According to the spirit of Shinto, these buildings should be destroyed and reconstructed every twenty years; so

there's this cycle of destruction and reconstruction. There are two sites. Once every twenty years, two new buildings rise up from the ground. They're made from natural wood and aren't painted. The wood is taken from a nearby mountain where cryptomerias [Japanese cedars] are cultivated. So one has the impression that the cycle even includes the neighbouring mountains. It's a way of understanding time that one only finds in Japan. Ancient architectural techniques are preserved and transmitted to the present. Sometimes it's said that this cycle of destruction/reconstruction exists to preserve this know-how, and also because Shinto always strives for the new. In the context of the temporality of architecture, it's an exceptional case that is specifically Japanese.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: You now build throughout the world and have shown projects in the United States and in Europe. Does the experience of building in different countries create variations in your work? Are there relations with the different cultures or different histories of the different places or, from your point of view, is your way of working universal?

KS: Wherever we go, the buildings aspire to have links with the environment. That approach doesn't change. That means that in each of the places we're subject to a range of influences. For example, in the case of the building in Essen, it was the first time that we had built something entirely from concrete, because we often use steel structures. Yet in that sort of place, rather than using this type of frame, we thought that we would need a solid structure, which led to the choice of concrete. Of course, we don't live permanently in these places so we have our own way of looking at things, our own approach. But in the different places, we think of the specific sites and we design accordingly. We are always the designers of these projects, so there are inevitably similarities between the projects, but each is a response to a specific place. For example, what we've done in New York [New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003–7], in the heart of the city, is a block that's quite important. When a building reaches a certain size it shouldn't have a different scale from its environment. We always make

sure that we have this relation to the surroundings. We choose the materials and the construction process based on this.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: You spoke about how your architecture is destined to merge with the landscape, or with the trees, etc., as if ultimately the disappearance of the architecture were a value in itself. I would like to know if that's really the case.

RN: When we talk about merging with the landscape that doesn't mean disappearing, because to merge with the landscape is to harmonize. This is possible because there are two elements. When one of the elements disappears, there's no longer the possibility of harmonizing. So our goal isn't to make architecture disappear, nor nature, but to allow them to coexist. The aim is to avoid an antagonistic coexistence.

Public space

So how did you start designing the Rolex Learning Centre [Lausanne, Switzerland]? What was the first drawing, how did you get the idea?

RN: It actually started with several kinds of bridge-shaped things, each going their own way. We tried to create a multidirectional bridge complex.

KS: The competition started just after the completion of Kanazawa and Almere [De Kunstlinie Theatre and Cultural Centre, Netherlands]. For those we designed a ground-floor building. We wanted to try another type of building for the Learning Centre, a building with more than one floor. The programme told us that the space for students – and even for the people living in the neighbourhood – should stay open for twenty-four hours a day, which meant that if we divided the problem into a few layers it would somehow be more natural. We also knew that with a ground-floor building, people can only enter at the edge of the building. So we tried to make the building higher, but bigger, one continuous space, but at the same time make it possible for people to reach the centre of the building. This took

some time and in the end we came up with this. People can approach from everywhere and yet reach the very heart of the building.

What is in the centre of the building?

RN: We have an entrance foyer in the middle of the building. We have a curved line to create an open space under the building so that people can directly move to the middle.

The shapes of the holes in the roof are all different: some are bigger than others.

KS: Sometimes we have one big space with two openings. One big hole that provides distance and a smaller one that creates a more intimate space.

So people are going to do a lot of walking in this building! And there's a lot of public space for the students. It's not only classrooms.

RN: All the space above ground is open to the students. We have a library, a restaurant ... there are many different types of public space and many different topographies.

And what is this reflective material? Is it aluminium?

RN: The slabs are concrete and the roof is a steel construction.

It's amazing, it's like the building becomes a landscape. The underside of the roof also seems to have a mirroring effect. What else are you working on at the moment?

RN: The Louvre-Lens project.

You are also Director of the Venice Architecture Biennale. Is this your first big curatorial project or have you curated shows before?

RN: No, it's the biggest one, I think. The biggest and the first.

You have done exhibition design though, for your own shows and for 'Mutations'. There was also the project you did together with Rei Kawakubo ['Spatial Design for Comme des Garçons', Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 2009–10].

KS: Yes, I designed a series of acrylic bubbles, a curved labyrinth to display clothes. The intention was that the colour spreads through the space.

It looks beautiful, like a painting. The dresses are floating in the space, levitating. How does it work?

KS: We made a transparent body. Sometimes the people can enter through the Plexiglas and get close to the material itself.

They also become like sculptures.

KS: Normally I see Comme des Garçons fashion in retail, which means I'm a customer. But here the idea was to select, to show and to idealize the pieces as sculpture or art. Sorry, we have to go and catch our plane!

So this is the shortest interview we've ever done: sixteen minutes at Charles de Gaulle!

Architecture and nature

This is our seventh interview since 1997 and I thought it would be great to begin with the beginning. How did you come to architecture, how did it all start? You once mentioned [Kiyonori] Kikutake and a story about a magazine.

KS: When I was a child, I saw a picture of Kikutake's Sky House in one of my mother's magazines. I was around ten years old, so I couldn't understand the meaning, but this photo attracted me a lot. I thought, 'This should be how to build a house.' Then I forgot about it. In Japan we have to decide the direction of study before we try to enter university. At that point I remembered being very interested in this building as a child, so I decided to try architecture. I joined an architecture school and soon found a photo and realized it was the photo I'd seen as a child. Architecture was

something very abstract for me, but that photo made me want to continue with it.

What about you, Ryue?

RN: I don't have a story like that. I was already an architect when I realized! I didn't have any sort of decision-making about becoming an architect, it just happened. [Laughs]

It would be interesting to hear a little bit more about your influences. Kikutake is a great example. I read this text by Dutch designer Florian Idenburg about there being less of a need amongst young architects in Japan to 'kill the father or mother', that somehow there is more of a continuum, from Kunio Maekawa, who was Corbusier's apprentice and a Japanese pioneer, to Kenzo Tange, and from Tange to Metabolism, Arata Isozaki, and the Kazuo Shinohara generation and then to Toyo Ito and to you. How do you see yourself in this continuum and which architects inspired you and your work?

RN: I think we have been influenced by so many great Japanese architects. For instance, Shinohara and Toyo Ito and [Hiroshi] Hara: they are all great to us. Of course Kikutake is one of the greatest architects.

KS: I don't know Idenburg's description and I don't really know the situation here in Europe, but in Japan, the young architects do sometimes criticize the older generation and try to develop a new direction. Of course, I am now *in* the older generation, so sometimes I am also criticized by younger architects. At the same time, for me at least, I didn't have too much interest in killing. I am more interested in learning. I was influenced by and learned a lot from the older generation.

One architect you've worked with very closely is Toyo Ito. What did you learn from Toyo Ito, what did he transmit to you?

KS: I think the biggest thing is that we normally think of architecture in two dimensions, but in the end it will be realized as a three-dimensional thing.

So there's a question of how to jump from the two-dimensional field, to the three-dimensional world. I think I learned the relation between abstract and concrete, the balance between abstraction and reality, from him. Of course, I finished working for him more than twenty years ago, so I cannot say now if my work is part of this continuum or whether it has moved away in a different direction.

Are there any other inspirations? You've just done an installation in the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona that is about adding another layer to the pavilion.

KS: In the pavilion we tried to make a soft, transparent space. Sometimes the sun hits the thin, acrylic surface and we can realize a very fragile, transparent, soft space, but when the sun has gone, this disappears and there is just Mies van der Rohe's space.

You also added the chairs that we are sitting on.

RN: The 'rabbit chairs'. [*Laughs*] They are really different from him. I thought it would be nice to make chairs made from a hand-drawn line, which is not at all a mathematical, scientific line. It's a more organic shape. They asked us to think about mass production, creating a thousand chairs all at once. We put forward the idea that the construction people draw the line on every single chair to make them all different. This is a nice idea, I think, but finally they gave up: it was too complicated. We drew one line and this was duplicated, but the free-hand idea still remains.

I was also thinking, when I saw the Mies van der Rohe project, that it's not only about transparency, it's about multiple reflections. Beatriz Colomina [architectural historian] wrote a very interesting text where she basically connects it to the Eames House and to many moments where the plane is broken and there are multiple reflections. That reminded me also of our experience in London, your Serpentine Pavilion, which in a similar way had to do with multiple reflections.

RN: We are very much interested in architecture's relationship with nature, the way architecture appears together with the surroundings. This is one of the important things that we want to develop. Using acrylic or aluminium creates more complex relations between nature and the architecture. Another thing is that we love architecture that opens up to the outside, to invite people to come in and come out, very free architecture with no dividing boundaries.

KS: The material, of course, reflects something and we can see it. But, for example at the Serpentine: in front of the pavilion is a road and I can see a car driving along it, but I also see the car and the people in the ceiling. Sometimes it's very difficult to just feel the environment, and through the reflection we have a way to have a relation to it. Not just 'I can see the car driving'; more, 'I am here with the car.'

That's very interesting, because these relations and connections also have to do with the park. You often make this analogy to the park as a place where many different things are coming together. The Learning Centre in Lausanne, which has just opened, has to do with that as well – the visitor is a flâneur walking through a landscape.

RN: One of the biggest ideas that we have been trying to develop is, as you said, creating architecture like a park. In Lausanne, what we did was create a very big room, with very many different kinds of programmes, open to each other, encouraging communication between them. We also designed the topography to give a very different landscape and character to each area and each programme, so that people can find a place where they want to stay. The building has a three-dimensional movement creating open space below it, allowing everybody outside to come directly into the centre of the building from all around. The entrance is in the middle of the building. People can stay where they like, as they would do in a park.

KS: Also, the ceiling and floor basically run parallel. So it's a huge random space, but your view is always cut either by the floor or the ceiling, so you

cannot see the edge of the building. As an interior experience you can never imagine the whole building, but just feel continuity. Discussing it now, I realize that maybe this also has some similarity with a reflection: it's a mirror. A mirror, like in the Serpentine Pavilion, allows people to feel they are in a beautiful, large park, whereas what we have actually made is instead a small park and a canopy.

One thing which is very interesting about Lausanne is that it ties in a lot with Venice and your Biennale and the idea of people meeting in architecture. It's very much a meeting place where people, for all kinds of reasons, can meet. It's about learning, it's about knowledge, it's a library, it's a multi-purpose hall, it's a café, it's a restaurant. Douglas Gordon once said that, for him, art is a pretext to have a conversation. In the case of your Learning Centre, we could almost say architecture is a pretext for having a conversation.

RN: The university people asked us to think about what kind of public space could be nice for the students and the faculty. We found the idea of one room, which doesn't have the definition of 'this is a corridor, this is a classroom, this is where you study, this is where you move'. We decided to throw this kind of definition away. We went to the university and we saw that there are so many students walking on the street, talking. They are studying in the street. I also saw that there are many students in the classroom, although it seems as though they are not studying. So I felt that students are people who can study, exchange information, discuss anywhere, even whilst moving. A bunch of classrooms lined up along a corridor doesn't work so well. One of our ideas is that students can discuss and come up with ideas anywhere: when they study or when they move or when they drink a coffee. This is the idea we thought would be nice to realize with this building. People can meet. *[Laughs]*

KS: Also maybe the space only appears *with* people. It is just some nondescript space, and if people meet or start to do something, the space

appears.

People can come from all sides.

KS: Yes. After the completion of the Kanazawa museum, which also has few doors and is open to three hundred and sixty degrees, we realized that people come from every direction, but still reach the edge of the building. So in Lausanne we tried to make more progress, so that people from every direction can arrive at the centre of the building. The site is in front of the existing EPFL [École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne] campus and if people approach from the city they arrive at the Rolex Learning Centre, but they can still see the existing campus and can still cross the site and reach it directly. At the same time people can see the inside of the Learning Centre as they pass through.

This idea of people meeting in your Learning Centre brings us to Venice and the Venice Biennale, here in the Arsenale. How did you come to this idea of people meeting in architecture?

RN: We first started with research, to learn what kind of architects are active right now all over the world, through the internet, through books and through friends.

KS: We were quite torn on the theme. Of course, there are not so many possibilities, but this year we tried to focus on the building and the space. Also, the title sounds very positive and it's not so clearly defined. People are free to decide what it means. I also thought about how we have a lot of new technologies in this era that give us a diversity of methods to communicate with people or to discover things. Maybe people can find new ways to do things online but still meet face to face. As an architect, I think this is important.

RN: We have two different ways to meet people. One is meeting people in reality, like now, face to face, but we have another way to talk with people through the mobile phone or through the computer, in a virtual reality. I think this versatility is great.

*This is not the first time you've had involvement with exhibitions.
You've designed exhibitions before ...*

RN: Actually, this is our first time to do the curatorial thing. We have done many exhibition designs and have joined many exhibitions as participants, but we have never curated. This is our first experience.

What does it feel like to curate a show for the first time?

RN: Very difficult. [Laughs] Everybody thinks something different. We could never create this kind of diversity ourselves. If we do a project as architects, everything that we do is our own and this creates a kind of unavoidable continuity. In a curatorial exhibition, all the pieces are done by different people, creating a diversity that I really appreciate.

*Early on you made the decision to limit the number of
participants. It's fewer participants than usual and you've given
each one more space.*

RN: I think we chose forty-seven participants in the end. This basically corresponds to the number of rooms that the Venice Biennale has.

KS: With an architecture exhibition it's very difficult to know how to show the architecture. The Art Biennale can show the art itself, but architecture is always shown through other media. Architecture is a profession that uses space as a medium. That's why we decided to give one room to each participant. For us, each room is the context, the site, and I expected every room to be a new project. This is what I tried to do. I wanted the participants to respect all the things that were already there. For example, in Jan De Vyllder's space there is the exit to the corridor, or the elevator, or the staircase, but he's done really wonderful work in using these existing things as part of his project.

*You're not imposing an overall exhibition design. You say in your
text that the atmosphere of the exhibition will be reached through
multiple viewpoints rather than through a single orientation. This*

is opposed to some previous Architecture Biennales where there was a given exhibition design that everything had to fit into.

KS: Sometimes we're asked to send models to exhibitions with a particular size. The Biennale is big, but we would lose some diversity if there was a uniform size prescribed, even though each model and its meaning is so different. But of course, we are fully involved: we selected the forty-seven participants, which means we've already lost some diversity. This year we showed this selection, next time the curator will show another.

The space where we are sitting now is a portrait of an exhibition that has been designed by you.

RN: You can see all of the participants' faces when you come into this room, because it's transparent. You can see the forty-seven monitors all at once and you can hear everybody talking together. *[Laughs]*

KS: This room is made up of the participants' faces. *[Laughs]*

And it involves your exhibition design with the small tables and chairs.

RN: Because this is a low-budget project *[laughs]*, we decided to use the legs of the 'rabbit chair' and put a stainless steel panel on it for the base of the monitors. It's a very simple construction.

KS: We wanted to make something between furniture and a machine. The sponsor loaned us the monitors. One solution would have been to make some tables and put the monitors on them. Or we could have made some kind of structure to support them, but we wanted to make something that looks like furniture, but also looks like a machine: something that looks different. Or looks like an animal in the same way as the chair. *[Laughs]*

Another thing we haven't discussed is your own participation in the Biennale.

RN: Sejima has done an installation at the Centre Pavilion at Giardini, using the one room to show the Teshima Art Museum [2010] done by me, and the

Inujima Art House project done by Sejima. These are two different projects done on different islands in the same region, with the same client.

This region in Japan has a really beautiful atmosphere, so we thought it would be a nice idea to create this landscape feeling by making maquettes of these big islands with our small projects on them.

KS: My project is primarily a renovation, with some new construction, and there is no way to express or explain that concept. I could make a bigger architectural model, explaining how I renovated it and added new spaces, but my main intention was to make new scenery for the village. If you walk around the small village, sometimes you enjoy the village, but sometimes you think it's art. Sometimes the village appears like a museum, sometimes the art appears as though it's not art, but more like nature. That means that photos would only be partial, but not enough and also the model itself is not enough. I thought that only film could show that atmosphere. In Ryue's case also, the building is very strongly related to the surroundings. So we asked Fiona [Tan] to make a film. The idea was not necessarily to focus on the architecture, but rather to capture the atmosphere.

This collaboration with artists is something you do quite frequently.

RN: We are very much interested in doing collaborations with artists, because they are such unique people. [Laughs] They have a very different viewpoint on things; perspectives that we haven't seen. Luisa Lambri is one of the greatest photographers. I love her work. She always has a very beautiful way to see things.

KS: That's not really collaboration though. She took photos of what she wanted, so sometimes we didn't even know that it was our building. [Laughs] With Fiona, of course, we explained our idea in the beginning and then she made her own work.

RN: We also often invite Walter Niedermayr to shoot our projects when they are completed. He often gives us a very different viewpoint for seeing our architecture. We appreciate this very much.

There are also some projects of yours that have to do with artworks, because they are almost like happenings. One of the things I am very interested in is your Field Party [2009] with one hundred barbecues.

RN: *Field Party?* Ahh. [Both RN and KS laugh]

We interviewed Andrea Branzi here in the room and we spoke about No-Stop City [1969] – looking at the different monitors in the room is almost like No-Stop City. It made me think of your idea with the barbecues.

KS: A few years ago I was doing something with children and we planned an event.

RN: The project site was a really huge area in the suburbs of Tokyo.

KS: Every ten metres or so there was a barbecue and each one had just one kind of food on it: chicken, meat, different vegetables, etc. The people had to move according to what they wanted to eat. The site was in an area of new housing development, so people didn't really know each other, but in trying to eat what they wanted they would meet other people by chance, creating an opportunity to communicate.

RN: We also prepared many chairs to allow them to move and sit where they liked, and a crane so that people could fly. They could go a hundred metres up to feel the sky and enjoy the view of what was happening on the field. It was beautiful.

KS: From on the ground you couldn't see everything, but on the crane you could see it all.

RN: It was really scary. Not so many people tried it, but I did. [Laughs]

To come back to the exhibition, you noted that the role of this Biennale is to reconsider the potential of architecture in contemporary society.

KS: I have been thinking about finding a possibility, about making some kind of space, like a park, with some activities, where sometimes the space appears, sometimes it disappears. I think that a park allows for many different people to stay together: even if I am alone in the park I can feel the continuity to society or people. This is what I have been thinking, up until now. But we invited people from all over the world and each architect can, I think, show a different view. I'm very curious about how people feel in the different rooms with the different participants. For example, sometimes the big sound from over there disturbs this interview, but there is another world or view there. We've used the existing building. We've tried to put different things together. Maybe we need something small between each section, but in this case we don't have anything, so sometimes things disturb one another. This was the thing we thought about the most: how to put the projects next to each other. We spent a lot of time on the positioning of each project.

I think it would be very interesting if we could talk more about the Teshima Art Museum and about how it relates to its context and also how the collection of the work also affects the design of the museum. The interior resembles a horizon somehow.

RN: One of the special things that I found at the beginning of this project is that the surrounding is not a city or a town, it's just nature. I could see hills and slopes: everything was natural. The idea of creating one room with an organic line came from a relation with these surroundings. So I drew a space that looks like a drop of water, with a shell structure that flies about sixty metres without being supported by any columns, to create one room. I also used a few big openings to have wind, sunlight and rain coming inside. I think I appreciate these openings because you can feel you are enclosed, but you can also feel you are open to the outside. These sensations, which are very different and usually separated, come together.

How did you get this idea of the water-drop shape?

RN: The client asked me to think about just one room. Normally a museum must have many different rooms, such as storage, curators' rooms, an entrance, a café maybe and a few exhibition rooms, but in this case they didn't want us to think about this kind of organization, they wanted us to think about just one room. Then there were the natural surroundings. This drew me to the water-drop idea. This is a shape that looks very flexible and fits very nicely to nature.

And you defined the goal in the project, and I quote, 'to create a fusion between the environment and the building, a fusion between art and architecture and also to realize a single unit comprising all these elements'.

RN: When I work on museum projects I often have the feeling that this is a very architectural space designed by an architect, but I also have a different feeling that it's an artistic atmosphere. Artists install their projects in the room, but actually I feel that their project already starts before people enter the room. The experience of the museum, its architecture, gives a lot to the audience. The case of the Teshima Art Museum is very special because there is only one room and there is only one artist, Rei Naito. She was asked to do just one piece. People come from far away in Tokyo to the nature of the island and they walk to the museum. So that experience is already a part of her project. Of course, this is also part of my project. It's impossible to divide. It's all a mixture of your experience. That's why I decided to do a kind of collaboration, to talk with her, to decide on every single detail happening in the architecture or outside the architecture, in the landscape.

Is there a certain political dimension in your work aimed at more interventions within cities by women architects?

KS: I think there is less difference between male and female architects in the younger generations. There are a lot of female students at the university. When I went to university there were very few female students, around five per cent, but now it's almost fifty per cent. There are not so many active female architects right now, but there will be a lot more in the future.

I have two last questions. One is the Rainer Maria Rilke question. He gave advice to a young poet and I was wondering what your advice to a young architect or student who visits the 12th International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale, in 2010 would be?

RN: We have never thought about this! [*Laughs*]

KS: Maybe the young architect or student will feel that the things here are not young enough. They might think, 'I can do something newer.'

RN: I think Japanese students don't really know other cultures. Since this is an international exhibition, I hope they can begin to experience cultural diversity.

KS: I also think that many young students already know these things through other media, but that this is a different way to show them. I hope that people, and not only young people, can rethink what they know and what they feel.

That leads us to the very last question, which is a question I've asked you many times, about your unrealized projects and projects which haven't happened yet. Today I was thinking it could be interesting to talk about dreams and I wondered: what is your dream for the twenty-first century?

RN: I don't have an answer to that, but I want to think about what kind of lifestyle is nice for us, for the people who are living in the twenty-first century. In some of the things we are doing we still use twentieth-century culture. There must be something new happening in my lifetime, but it's not yet well defined. When I see nineteenth-century architecture, I can understand how they could live, what kind of wonderful lifestyle they had. Architecture presents how people have been living in every century, so the people of the twenty-first century must also present their lifestyle: what kind of contemporary lifestyle can be possible through architecture. This is one of the things I want to continue thinking about through my projects.

KS: Also, 2010 is maybe a nice point in time. Up to 2010 we've already had ten years of the twenty-first century and so many things have changed very quickly. Now is a good time to think about that. Of course, lifestyle has continued from the past century, but without seriously thinking about it, many things have just changed. Now we are now.

TINO SEHGAL

It's important to support artists early in their trajectory, and with Sehgal I was there close to the beginning. It was 1999 and I was working on an exhibition that brought together art and science. We invited the choreographer Xavier Le Roy, and he brought in Sehgal, who was still a dance student at the time. I thought he was remarkable and when I got a phone call a few years later from the curator Jens Hoffmann, saying that Sehgal was now entering the art world, I wanted to know what he was up to.

Sehgal had brought his dance work and choreography into live art, creating exhibitions that also drew on his time studying economics. We recorded our very first conversation, about his practice (which included rules for the institutions he works with, such as no recording of the pieces), and that was the first-ever interview published with Tino Sehgal. For one of the conversations here we met in Frankfurt in a hotel at breakfast, and we now have a pact that although we talk often, we will record a new conversation only every three years. We've recorded four now over twelve years, and three of the four are included here.

The ideology of doing

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *This first question is usually my last question: could you tell us about your unrealized projects?*

TINO SEHGAL: I have one unrealized project which I think will definitely remain unrealized. It is part of a series of works that I am working on at the moment that run for the duration of the whole opening hours of a temporary exhibition, and it's called 'This is Hans Ulrich Obrist'.

[Laughs] Can you tell me more?!

TS: One comes into an empty space in a museum and there's you, interviewing people of your choice, say two-hour sessions. So you can choose the people and there's no recording but you have to interview for the whole day. And when visitors come into the space you have to go up to them and say, 'This is a piece by Tino Sehgal, it is called "This is Hans Ulrich Obrist", two thousand and whatever, courtesy of the artist' – since I don't have a gallery.

But seriously, most of my pieces are unrealized also because it is not possible to build them in a studio or make a model of them; I also don't have a notebook so I don't write them down.

Do you draw?

TS: No.

You never draw?

TS: I was really bad at art in school. Once I was in danger of repeating a year because of that. This is creating some great narratives. I cannot draw perspective, which was very frustrating.

So to begin with the beginning. How did it all start for you? We have something in common which is that we both studied economics, so I was obviously interested in asking you about that.

TS: My biography is very linear actually. I was very interested in politics when I was a youngster. It was like my teenage trip, like I imagine a lot of teenagers have. You probably also had them.

So I was interested in politics and I thought, ‘If you’re serious about this then you should study political economy’, because at the end of the day that is the place where things are discussed. I don’t know if that is true now, but I certainly believed it for ten years. I’m still involved in political economy. So on one side I was interested in a theoretical practice, like economics: I think that the basis of economics and civilization is founded on two things – on the one hand we have something like lack, in German we have the nice word ‘Mangel’.

Lack or scarcity.

TS: Yes, though I don’t like the English word so much. Civilizations were always dealing with the fact that there is not enough to survive, and with ... the threats of ‘nature’. Growing up, I felt that this was somehow lost: there was no lack and there was no threat from nature. But on the other hand, all present economic and social conventions have resulted from millions of years of trying to deal with these two problems. So, to say it in another way, what happens in the middle of the twentieth century in the Western societies is a major rupture in the civilizational axiomatic: in that moment, Western economies not only had excess supplies for the first time but because this production was now no longer threatened by nature, it actually could itself also endanger the specific disposition of the planet in which human existence seems possible. At this moment these two seemingly eternal civilizational problems have been solved so thoroughly that their solutions are potentially again threatening quality of life. So in my view, this really changes the premise for economics and it struck me as a very interesting thing to rethink how economics could work. I thought that the mode of

production that is inherent to dance was an interesting model for this. While visual art proposes that we can extract material from natural resources and then transform it and then we have a product – and that's it, it's there to stay, and thus follows the historically prevalent mode of production – dance transforms actions to obtain a product or artwork and it produces and de-produces this product at the same time.

It doesn't create objects.

TS: Yes. It creates meanings and 'things', somehow.

Relations?

TS: Yes, always, because it's between humans. Anyway that was the beginning, with dance. But then I realized later that it could go with anything, it could be spoken word, interviews with Hans Ulrich Obrist without a camera, it could go with singing ...

And what was your first performance? I know you are not very keen on the notion of performance.

TS: No, no. I did performances but I called them theatre pieces or dance pieces.

So could you tell me about these?

TS: Well, the first piece that I would really want to talk about is the *Twentieth Century* dance piece [1999]. It's not the first that I made, but it's the first one I'm interested in talking about now. I was only interested in visual art in the sense that it deals with the relationship between humans and objects. But how could I do that in theatre? My idea was to make a piece that exhibited the medium of dance, in order to point to the idea of production that is inherent to this medium. I wanted to make a piece which had no specific meaning in the sense of form and content, only exposing the medium. At first I thought this would be impossible, an unrealizable project. I cannot stand still, that would be already a very specific aesthetic and form and content. And I cannot disappear: then it would be an

installation, and again very specific. So my idea was instead to do all the forms and contents available in the genre art/stage dance, hoping that they would cancel each other out in regard of their specific positions. Art dance started at the beginning of the twentieth century with Isadora Duncan – she was the first to think of herself as an artist.

So I was working just with my body, and then I called it like this big ‘Twentieth Century’ exhibition in Berlin. It has different titles. In German it’s called ‘... das XX. Jahrhundert’, and in French it’s called ‘Musée d’Art Moderne, Section XXème siècle, Département’. It’s always announced untitled but then I change the title orally in the show. In Swedish it’s called ‘Permanent Collection’.

And is there an André Malraux notion of the musée imaginaire – the imaginary museum?

TS: I’m not a hundred per cent sure if I understood his idea, so correct me if I’m wrong; now is it that there can be one kind of museum that could show all possible artworks?

And it’s also to do with the fact that you have the museum in your head – it’s a mental museum. Not necessarily having all the objects.

TS: I would say that my museum is a temporarily material museum, but of course it is a museum which is related to a specific department – the twentieth-century-dance department. I think Malraux was going for more somehow.

Can you tell us about a few of your favourite pieces in this large museum of the twentieth century? What are some of the highlights?

TS: One thing I have to say is that I never reconstruct. It’s not a museum in the correct sense that I show original works or whatever. I just show ideas. I make work ‘in the style of’. I never saw a dance by Isadora Duncan. That’s also a notion of history that I think is more interesting in the sense not of

original works, traces, texts and so forth, but of how these ideas come into society and perform themselves through this society. They are there even though they are not there any more. And I think that dance is a good model for seeing that. But if you want some names – I never mention names in the piece – it's fun because people can see something else in it, because a lot of things are linked. Nothing is totally original. So people say, for example, 'I really liked it when you did Paul Taylor.' I don't even really know Paul Taylor, but I know that they mean what for me is the Cunningham part. It is similar with the Pina Bausch part, everybody would recognize Pina Bausch as Pina Bausch but actually I pasted one movement of [Stravinsky's] *Sacre du printemps* of Pina Bausch and then I had four other epigones of Pina Bausch from Germany. So only every fifth movement is a Pina Bausch movement but everybody will of course see it as Pina Bausch even though I don't say it is. It's just the specific ideology of doing.

So you started with the museum, and then what came next?

TS: I made my museum, though I would say I started with theatre (although I'm not interested in the connotations of the word 'theatre'), in a *dispositive*^{*} sense; this is the *dispositif* that I worked on for the *Twentieth Century* piece. People sit, they shut up and I do something. So I brought the museum into this *dispositif* and then after that I brought dance into the museum. That was also a matter of practical possibilities. Before I didn't have the possibility of having access to the museum, and now I have it. I think that both ways work, but for me to be in the museum is more interesting since it brings out more of my points. And people are not thinking about certain specificities as, e.g., dance history when they see my pieces in the museum but a lot of people do when they see the *Twentieth Century* piece. When people come into the museum, like here at Manifesta, a lot of them are really shocked or astonished.

Really?

TS: Yes, not that I am interested in shocking people. What is interesting for me is that they are astonished not about *what* this person is doing, but *that*

there is a person doing something. Do you understand what I mean? They are questioning the medium more than the specific activity. So I felt that this was actually a better place for my work than the theatre.

Perhaps you could tell me more about your piece here at Manifesta so I can get a more concrete understanding of the ways in which your work has changed. It is very different to the Twentieth Century piece, maybe it's more sculptural now?

TS: You think the *Twentieth Century* piece is much more performative than it is sculptural?

Or is it a post-medium condition?

TS: No, specific-medium condition, I think! I'm not sure I fully understood your question.

I was interested in knowing what the museum offers you. You're basically coming into the domain of death, from the live arts into the zone of death. For me that is a very interesting transfer.

TS: That is also the case in the piece 'This is Hans Ulrich Obrist' – there is life, Hans Ulrich Obrist, in the museum. Yes, of course it has something to do with this: I would say the museum is about death, because it is about overcoming death, that it is about prolonging life, so it's double-sided. Personally I am interested in proposing different notions of history, presence, eternity. The piece [*Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, 2000] in Manifesta, for example, is on the one hand life – there are live people and it is a live piece – but on the other hand, it is also performing the historical function of the museum, since it consists of a person slowly moving through bodily positions from different pieces by Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, but not as them. I've never seen Bruce Nauman's *Wall-Floor Positions* and I don't think it's important that I see the work.

Have you read the instructions?

TS: Well, I saw some photos, I read something about it and somebody told me about it.

It's hearsay, a rumour.

TS: Yes, but this is another way in which history works, and it's more relevant than the one of original texts and relics: I show these bodily positions in a different way. Maybe Bruce Nauman wouldn't even realize. Maybe he would see that my interpreters do a certain bodily position of his but in a transformative, slow movement. I'm giving the museum this aesthetic of the movement which is somehow mine but is also Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham playing on Bruce Nauman. So I'm also taking up the function of the museum in doing something new.

Can you tell me more about the issue of these instructions that we also published in the context of 'Do It'? So I'm very interested in instructions for the performances. There has been a long history of instructions in art throughout the twentieth century, from Duchamp to Moholy-Nagy to Fluxus and conceptual art. This idea of 'doing it' and 'redoing it', of reinterpreting the same instructions. Can you tell me more about this in your work?

TS: I thought about instructions when you invited me to take part in 'Do It'. For visual art people, this seems to be something special. In practices where humans are instructing other humans, such as in theatre of whatever kind, there are always instructions, not in written form, but in the form of the director saying, 'You should go from the left to the right', and so on. With the instructions always comes interpretation, which I think was probably your interest in doing the 'Do It' exhibition. But if you look around at Manifesta, some people will look at my piece for hours, I've realized, and they're comparing the people. Every two and a half hours, the shift changes, and they say, 'But this person was doing it like this.' Yes, of course, there is always going to be interpretation, there cannot be an original. And even when the same dancer does the same movement or the same singer sings the same song, it will always be different, so instruction and interpretation are

always there and are inseparable from the medium or from the actors. For 'Do It' what I was interested in, but what didn't work out – though I would be interested in pursuing it – was that I would have liked to have had a person who was going to Mexico, so not to write an instruction. But I didn't find anyone. I wasn't so happy with writing an instruction; it is a fine idea, but the notion of my work is not written. I wanted to meet someone who was going to Mexico and tell them that I wanted my piece to be like 'this' and they would have carried it in their body, and then gone into the museum, spoken to the curator and told them how it should be.

Not over the phone!

TS: No, not over the phone! This body-to-body transmission was an idea I found interesting. Maybe we can do it next time.

Can you tell me about the instructions for your work?

TS: I think it's a really good piece. It's called 'This is Hans Ulrich Obrist'. I'm going to say that all the time. So, seriously, the piece is called *This is good* and it should be that you come into a normal museum space, with some sculptures or paintings, and there is a museum guard there. After ten or fifteen seconds, it depends on the guard, he makes a big movement to draw people's attention. The movement doesn't have a beginning or an ending. I always explain to the interpreters that it's like da Vinci's proportion figure in movement, all the movement at the same time. So they make the movement and after about four seconds they stop. The movement makes a sound and the spectators or museum visitors look. Then the guard stops and says, 'Tino Sehgal, "This is good", 2001, courtesy of the artist.' So the difference from the piece in Manifesta, for example, is that in the latter, there is still a label, there is still an object – the label – that is producing meaning. The next step, in *This is good*, is to put movement into the guard, who is anyways already there, and to substitute the label with the spoken word.

And have they filmed it?

TS: This is of course a problem.

That's the question: can there be a right or a wrong interpretation?

TS: I think that there can be different interpretations which have nothing to do with what I intended to do, but that doesn't mean that they're not valid or that they're not interesting. These interpretations are always there. When people look at a piece which has been made by an artist and it is exactly as the artist wanted to make it, and it is totally stable over time, then there are already different interpretations within the spectator. I mean, it's just a question of which stage of the reception process you put this interpretation at.

Exactly, that's very important. But to come back to the idea of instructions, I was interested in several aspects. I was interested in economy. So could you tell me more about this notion of the economy? The art economy is very different to that of the theatre world. It's very rare. James Lee Byars managed to sell performances for very high prices towards the end of his life, but to sell intangibles is very difficult and usually leads to an object. I know that you sold a performance to Jérôme Bel, so perhaps we could start this line of conversation with this concrete example.

TS: I have nothing against the term 'performance' itself, but we have to differentiate. I didn't sell a performance to Jérôme Bel; I did sell a piece to him, but it is somehow a visual artwork or installation. When I sell the *Twentieth Century* piece, it is a performance, a dance piece, and I sell it – to make my living, and this is not interesting at the moment, but there is a certain economy for this, though I would say that the dance presenters who invite and buy it don't own the piece.

At the moment you make a living from the performance-art world, to whom you sell performances?

TS: Well, it's not the performance-art world, I don't think there's a lot of money there; it's really the dance business.

TS: In the dance business it's not really a market, it's a market that is somehow sustained by the state. A dance piece can be sold, a solo piece, from about fifteen hundred to three thousand [dollars]. So there is not a big difference between a very famous artist and a not-so-well-known artist. There is not a lot of money, but a little. I'm not very interested in these matters, to be honest.

It is very different to the visual arts economy.

TS: Yes, I see. And so what I sold to Jérôme Bel is more of a visual art piece, and that's the piece in Manifesta. So he can show it when he shows his collection. There are lots of differences to performance art however. Performance artists didn't want to sell or reproduce their works, whereas I'm interested in creating products, but by rethinking the notion of a product as a transformation of actions, not as a transformation of material. The piece at Manifesta that I sold to Jérôme Bel is a product. It is very specific, it is reproducible in different parts of the world at the same time, but it's totally immaterial. It doesn't involve this whole civilizational mode of production we spoke about before.

It's intangible.

TS: What do you mean by 'intangible'?

Not material.

TS: Well, it's temporarily materialized in a body.

So it's virtual and then conceptualized?

TS: I'm not so interested in the virtual, but maybe I don't know enough about it.

I don't mean in the sense of 'virtual reality'.

TS: It has very strange connotations.

But in the Deleuzian sense, the word means 'potential', but maybe that's not so interesting for your work.

TS: Somehow it exists in my mind, in my body and the bodies of the people who know how to do it, and it also exists in their memories and in the memories of those who saw it. Maybe it does only become actual when it's staged in a museum. For me, this thing about the selling of the piece was very interesting in that we could stay very conventional with everything but that this whole civilizational mode of transformation of natural resources was not touched at all, in respect of the fact that this whole system of the product on the market historically is all based on this transformation of material. Everything we did was exactly the same except that this didn't happen.

Could you tell me more about this process of transfer? To repeat what I've understood so far: [it] is that there are different things. On the one hand you do performances in the dance context; and then you do pieces which happen in the visual art context.

TS: Yes, I try to do everything as normally as possible in the art context, but in order to achieve that I realize that on first glance it may be seen as a little unusual and this can produce some interesting meaning. There has been a whole history of structures, such as the art market, which still exists, which is problematic for specific reasons and by reasons I don't mean that I have a problem with the market – not at all – I think the market is great, but I do have a problem with the transformation of material for the reasons I gave at the beginning: mankind's endangering of the specific disposition that it is able to live in, and that there is no real need for new products. We already have a lot. Personally I'm not so interested in this conception of material goods. I have enough of them. I'm more interested in differentiating my subjectivity. So when I sold the piece, everything was conventional about it, but the essential core of the structure is left out. You're supposed to sell an object so that a collector has it in his house, and you hand it over, but when

I sold the piece to Jérôme, somehow nothing was given over that he can take back into his house or even put into his depot.

So not even a certificate.

TS: No, of course. So this is where I'm trying to be cleaner than performance art. Although I'm actually not so interested in performance art, it's not even really a reference for me. I'm especially trying to be cleaner than conceptual art in the sense that if we want to dematerialize the object, let's really dematerialize it. I'm still producing objects – not in the material sense of the word, but in the product sense of the word.

So what does Jérôme get?

TS: Well, he gets a lot of attention! Through your camera and the interview! [Laughs] No, he is specifying his collection.

Is he mentioned as a courtesy?

TS: Yes.

It's on the label?

TS: Yes.

So Jérôme Bel is a lender to Manifesta?

TS: Yes. They had to email him. I wouldn't have sold him the piece if he wouldn't always allow it to be exhibited. He has [Pierre] Huyghe, [Thomas] Hirschhorn, [Gabriel] Orozco and he always lends them. Anyway, it's certainly not going to be a disadvantage for him to exhibit it, it's unbreakable.

With all conceptual art there has been, in one form or another, a certificate which confirms the property of the copyright and so on. So I was curious to know you had to meet with a notary?

TS: Yes. What conceptual art was doing was dematerializing the art object into language, which they thought meant writing something on paper. They

are from the tradition of painting and sculpture somehow, so what do they do, they write on paper.

And they create a new fetish.

TS: I'm not interested in the notion of fetish.

Why?

TS: This has not been one of my problems. I would like people to fetishize my work, why not?

So you're not anti-fetishism?

TS: No, I'm not, but I'm just saying that if they really want to dematerialize the object, they haven't so far – there's still paper with colour on it – an object. Even though maybe this isn't seen as a painting, I would see it as painting. I'm trying to *really* dematerialize the object, so that there's no text, no object to certify that this object is an object or whatever. So we went to the notary. I'll tell the whole story.

I want to know everything!

TS: So Jérôme wanted to buy it and I said, 'OK, but I want to do it with an oral contract', and so I went to see a lawyer, and he said, 'Well, you should keep it [the contract] very simple and there should be a notary as a testimony, so if there is some fight, the notary will have more authority because this would normally be his job.' He said that there should also be a museum director to give it authority as art and so on. Later he said the best person as a testimony would be a notary, the second best would be a lawyer and the third best would be the director of an art museum, to reinforce this feeble thing. An oral contract is of course considered more feeble than a written contract. It took weeks to find a notary who was prepared to do this – everyone in Paris said, 'No, no, that's illegal' or 'It will take too much time to find out', but then I called one and he said, 'No problem.' I have a friend who had studied law and we met in a café and prepared the contract. Preparing the contract, we didn't write a thing down, we really tried to play

the game. She would tell me the sentences in French and I would repeat them to her, then I rehearsed it with her before we met the notary. The best anecdote is that there was a Ben Vautier painting on the wall in his office saying, 'On doit tout écrire.' ['We have to write everything.'] That's the best! [Laughs] The notary sat down and he was not allowed to write a bill as that could also be used as some kind of proof or certificate.

You paid the notary but there was no receipt.

TS: No receipt. So we went to the notary. The art critic Yvane Chapuis from Paris was there, my friend who studied law, Jérôme, the collector and me. We explained the contract to the notary and he said, 'Yes, I think this contract is OK', and then I repeated the contract very formally, saying our addresses and the *droit d'auteur* [authors' rights], the *droit moral* [moral rights], the title of the piece, the sum, and so on, Jérôme agreed, he gave me the money and then we shook hands.

He paid in cash?

TS: He paid in cash. This was the only object involved, and it's an object that doesn't have a value as an object. We're only interested in it as a means of transaction. That was the only object involved, and then, of course, the notary got some of the money.

One of the things I wanted to ask is about something which has changed a lot in the last years. It is this idea of parallel realities, of artists being in two, three or more worlds at the same time.

TS: I don't know if it's a cliché, nor whether for me it's interesting. I am not interested in putting attention on to the fact that I am doing things in different fields; actually I would be more comfortable not saying it. In the art world, in which I am most ambitious, it is important for me that people only think of what I do as art, and that they don't think of me as a dancer or know that I also work as a choreographer.

So you don't want to use the fact, basically?

TS: No, I would prefer to say that I only do works for the visual art context. That is not to say I don't like theatre; I like the idea of people coming together. I'm interested in that and I think it will become more important in my work at a later date, whereas at the moment I'm more interested in the context the museum can provide as a backdrop for my work. I'm interested in the theatre as a place where we can gather together, and I guess I will stick with this idea for a bit, but maybe I'll also stop. Whilst in visual art I have a series of works that go for ever, somehow.

Can you tell me about these unrealized projects?

TS: 'This is Hans Ulrich Obrist'! [Laughs]

So what happens next? What is your next project?

TS: I'm going to show *This is good* in an exhibition in Cologne called 'I Promise It's Political'. Then the Kunstverein in Stuttgart with a piece called *This is propaganda*. It's the piece that comes after *This is good*.

Have you ever been to the Kunstverein in Stuttgart? The Kuppelsaal has amazing acoustics, so when you come into the space, there are people who are employed as guards, at the normal rate that guards get, but who are also singers. So we will get guards who can sing, they turn away from the spectators and they sing very loudly. The lyrics they sing are 'This is propaganda, you know, you know, this is propaganda, you know, you know ...' and then the guard says, 'Tino Sehgal, 2002, courtesy of the artist.' So it's almost only the label except that the title of the piece is also being sung.

One of the issues we spoke about a little in Paris was the idea of collaboration.

TS: I am very afraid of the notion of collaboration somehow. If you say that there is a place of collaboration, that means that there is also a place which is not for collaboration. So it is a very difficult notion and I prefer not to use it.

It's always there – you cannot not collaborate. My favourite sentence from Rancière is where he says, 'The end of politics and the return of

politics are two ways of cancelling out politics.’ To say that politics has ended or returned means to cancel out politics everywhere since it is always in existence, and it is the same with collaboration. I don’t really see the point in the word ‘collaboration’. I think it is a word that has been too important for too long and I prefer not to use it. I know that in practical terms it means working with another artist, and personally I’m not interested in that either. What do you think about collaboration?

Art is always collaborating – it collaborates with art history all the time. You cannot not collaborate with art history.

You have mentioned your imaginary museum of dance, so could you tell me a little about your imaginary museum of visual art?

TS: I sometimes see my work in relation to Yves Klein, as a dialectical reworking of *Le Vide* [1958] ...

You’ve never mentioned that before, that’s very interesting. A reworking of Klein’s Le Vide.

TS: ... yes, a reworking. So if you imagine a solo exhibition of my work it would be an empty museum except that in each room there would be a person/guard doing something. Of course, Yves Klein’s space was never empty, there were always people inside, and if it was empty, it was irrelevant because nobody saw or experienced it. I would like to do a solo exhibition in a totally empty museum which at the same time would be full, empty and full, since there would be no objects whatsoever, but there would be loads of pieces going on in each room. So in some sense it would be very conventional.

And are there other visual artists who have influenced you?

TS: I was never really interested in dance in the sense of what can a body do or how a body should move. It’s just that I had no possibility of or interest in producing an object. But with this kind of an attitude at that point I could not enter the visual art context. I mean, you can’t simply dance your way in to the Kunstakademie. Then again, I also had no reason for going to the

Kunstakademie because you can read art history anywhere. There are many artists I respect. I must be influenced by all of them. I must be influenced by Picasso also, although I've never really looked at his work.

You said you were interested in Michael Asher?

TS: Yes, I don't know many of his works but I think that there is an aspect that is related to my work, that is when he changes the position of things. In Chicago, what [Benjamin] Buchloh writes about – I only know him through Buchloh's writing basically – when he takes out the façade of the museum and puts it inside. Basically he's not producing anything but he's still producing 'things'. In that way his work is similar to mine, even though he's still related to objects, since these are still objects when he takes a wall out or something. He's de-producing things or changing the position of things.

You told me about your interest in games.

TS: Maybe a more interesting notion to deal with would be the production of subjectivity through the production and possession of objects. In this respect, for example, Carsten Höller's or Xavier Le Roy's approach to games could also be interesting. I personally haven't worked on games at all, but I think they are great in the sense that they are trying to differentiate our subjectivity, but not through the perception of an object. So actually it is not at all that there are too many objects in the world, but maybe a sort of boredom with them.

Boredom with objects! Could that be a title?

TS: A title for what?

We need a title for this interview.

TS: I think it should be 'This is Hans Ulrich Obrist'! [Laughs] I have a whole series of works called *This is ...* –

What about 'This is an interview'?

TS: No, that wouldn't work! *[Laughs]* 'This is Hans Ulrich Obrist' could be a work of mine. It will never be realized, unless you want to realize it.

So I'm very interested in the game theory link which leads us to Xavier Le Roy, so can you maybe talk a little about this?

TS: Although the notion of games does not enter my own work at all, I really like these positions, since they are also dealing with a differentiation of subjectivity from human to human. It's transformative, or working on ways of daily interaction. And I think that even the notion of progress can be introduced with these kinds of practices. We're not interested in staying at the same point all the time, but where can we locate this progression? That's why I am very sceptical of new media art, since it locates progression where it has always been located: as technological progress, so it seems new media art implies that the way to be contemporary is to use contemporary technology. I'm interested in using technology which is potentially as old as human life, but in being contemporary with it.

Are there spaces left outside of the market? [Immanuel] Wallerstein in his book Utopistics says it's going to be a fifty-year transition of trying to find an alternative to the market.

TS: Firstly, I don't see a crisis.

No crisis?

TS: But to answer your question in a way that you were perhaps not pointing to, the air is a commodity outside of the market. We don't have to pay to breathe. If it was scarce, then we would probably have to pay for it, but since it is available for everybody in sufficient quantities, it does not need to be regulated by the market. I've never been able to understand what the specific ideology of the market is. Of course the market has a certain politicized, it has democratic or even anarchic aspects, but then it is a conveyor of lots of different and possibly opposing cultural ideologies; I mean, Wallerstein's book is also distributed via market economy; so the market is a regulatory force, if something is not directly accessible, there

have to be ways of regulating it, and one of these ways is the market. Central planning is another. I prefer the market.

But there is an increasingly unequal distribution in the world.

TS: What does this imply? Equal in which sense – equal in happiness, in material things?

In the sense that the rich are becoming more and more rich and the poor are becoming increasingly poor. [Joseph] Stiglitz describes this as a crisis; Wallerstein describes it as a crisis ...

TS: But which premise does this reaffirm? It reaffirms that somehow quality of life is in some way linked to these kinds of things, which I think is probably right.

Anyway, I'm interested in questioning this notion. I'm not saying that if the rich become richer and the poor become poorer that this is not a problem or that this is not related to quality of life, but I am interested in thinking about whether this assumption is so. Is the only way of assessing quality of life by what income you have? I don't have a high income, but I don't have a low one either. You probably have a higher one than me. We might both have health insurance. Maybe I'm happier than you? I don't know. You mentioned these games of Carsten Höller and Xavier Le Roy, yes, let's play games. If you shout 'Valerio!' it's happiness, it didn't cost anything and it is outside of the market. So I don't think the market economy is bad and I don't think it will go away. It's not a system in the sense that Communism was a system; it wasn't an ideology that people thought up. What we call market economy is something that has grown historically. There are layers and centuries of history implied in this organization, and I have a lot of trust in it. I think it would be arrogant to question this so quickly. It would also be very naive not to question it at all. But I think that most of these questions, as in this very well-marketed Empire book ...

... are dealt with in a very narrow way and this is dangerous because it doesn't allow for a proper critique. This brings us back to the selling of the

piece: no, I don't think the problem is with the market in terms of future life and its possibilities. I would say that transformation of material is a much greater problem. That has nothing to do with the market. And then on the other hand there are loads of things that are outside the market. There is a myth of the market as something autonomous. The market only exists in state regulation and only when the state can provide a certainty of specific rules so that people can be in the market. The notion of hyper-capitalism, of something totally liberal, is not correct: it is totally regulated. But in this regulation there is some space.

What about Utopia? That's my last question.

TS: We've had the first and last question of 'This is Hans Ulrich Obrist'! – I was thinking about this, because I knew you were going to ask this. I know that you're very interested in this idea. So I asked myself about the term 'Utopia'. Am I interested in it? I'm not sure. On the one hand I think that Utopia is interesting as a tool of reality, as something very practical, but on the other hand I haven't been eroticized by the term 'Utopia' in the way that you have. I don't think it's that sexy, but maybe you can explain to me why it might be. My first thoughts are that Utopia is something dangerous. Somebody once said that Communism was looking for a direct way to heaven and they found the direct way to hell. Communism was like a Utopia and I consider it a euphemism to say that there was a real existing socialism but actually there still is a true socialism or a proper socialism. There was a certain idea that was implanted into society – and why not, let's try it – but for reasons which were not considered, or were too complex to consider, it turned out to be different than it was thought. So I think Utopias can be something dangerous. They may also be something quite helpful but I'm probably something of a dilettante on this topic. I'm looking forward to your publications on Utopia and I will read them.

Your 'tool of reality' notion is interesting. You think of the idea of Utopia as some form of motor?

TS: A dangerous motor.

Manifestos

Tino, when we contacted you concerning the Manifesto Marathon with the idea that manifestoes played such a big role in the historic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century and then in the new avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s again, and the idea of revisiting manifestoes today, you suggested – immediately actually – that this could be more a conversation than a manifesto presentation. Could you explain why?

TS: One of the reasons is that I have no wish to make the, in my view, very male declaration of my intents. I think that is something which is very twentieth century, to have this kind of male confidence and modernist belief in the future and what will happen in the future and to kind of lay it down. So I thought the twenty-first century will be, hopefully, more like a dialogue, more like conversation, and maybe that in itself is a kind of manifestation or whatever. I just think the twentieth century was so sure of itself, and I hope that the twenty-first century will be less sure of itself. And part of that is to listen to what other people say and to enter a dialogue and not to stand up and declare one's intent. There's something weirdly retrograde about that.

Does this have to do with doubt, also, because manifestoes don't usually have so much to do with doubt?

TS: No, I don't think it has something to do with doubt. I think it has more to do with a sensibility for complexity. I think that there was still a kind of Newtonian sensibility towards the world in the twentieth century, and I hope we don't have that sensibility any more, that we have a sensibility for how complex processes are and that it is better to engage in them together than to pretend one has a vision. That doesn't mean to humble down in a postmodernist sense either though.

We live in a time that is more atomized and has, maybe, less cohesive artistic movements. Manifestoes have very often been related to movements. I think you have something to say on that.

TS: Yes. I found it quite amusing that you, a curator, were inviting an artist to give a manifesto and that is so twenty-first century somehow, so dialogical. Imagine some museum director telling the Dadaists, 'Now come and get your manifesto down!' In that sense, it has something sympathetic to my thinking. The other thing that I was interested in was definitely, 'OK, why not try and extrapolate what the twenty-first century could be?' I, like many other people, have some vague ideas about that, and I don't think they are very worked out, but maybe it's kind of twenty-first century to say them, even though they are not completely worked out. And the twenty-first century is not so old, either. One of the differences, I think, is that there is a certain sort of vulgarity about the twentieth century. How can I explain this? It relates to what I said before about this kind of confidence and loudness. It doesn't have aristocratic elegance; it has a kind of teenage vulgarity, like shouting out, 'This is what we are going to do!', 'We are against that!', and a kind of naivety in that as well. I hope the twenty-first century won't have that any more.

Can you talk more about this? Does 'aristocratic' mean to bring that back in a different way? Is it repetition and difference?

TS: This is a very rough idea, and I haven't worked it out, and I haven't really tried it out on anybody, so I am throwing myself into the insecurities of the twenty-first century. But in my view, we have the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, and before that we have a feudal system. Everybody knows that. The characteristics of this class system is that the aristocracy is exempt from labour while the others are basically producing. OK, the aristocracy is taking care of some governing functions, but basically has a lot of time to spend. And what does it spend this time on? Refinement of its attitudes, manners, the art of conversation, the art of living. Why does it do that? Because a) it has the time, but b) as Thorstein Veblen has famously shown, because it also has to demonstrate its position of richness and superiority by all the time it can waste on, for example, constructing its way of speaking. So you can recognize an aristocrat by the way he or she speaks because he or she has spent loads of time on refining

this manner of speaking. So this system, this cultural refinement that aristocracy has brought up, is related to the self, a conception of self, but it was obviously a deeply undemocratic thing and it was also built upon an exploitation of the other classes.

So then what happens with the French and the Industrial Revolutions is that we have a movement where this inequality, this injustice, is broken down, and we come into more democratic, and especially mass cultural, societies. I think that is also where visual art and the museum comes in. The new leading class, the bourgeoisie, does not have the same amount of leisurely time because it's not oppressing other classes; it does not have so much time to spend on refining itself, because it's still working. But, obviously, they are also still interested in a refinement, and so how do they do that? They do that by taking possession of the world via the objects they acquire, which obviously makes a link to their daily work life. As they generate income they can then spend this income, so it is also a mirror of the income they have generated. Subjectivity and aesthetics and all these things that, in aristocracy, were more related to the self, now, in a bourgeois mass culture, become more related to the object. That is also when museums are created, and the culture we are all in now where we go around museums and look at things, which is such a strange, peculiar exception in the history of mankind. So first we had pre-industrial society with its class injustice, but aesthetically refined parts of society, and then we had a more, let's say, just, democratized and therefore mass cultural society. This is a side point, but I think this is what a lot of cultural critics of the twentieth century – and maybe also the beginning of the twenty-first century – react to; they still have an aristocratic sensibility. Somebody like Adorno had an aristocratic sensibility, and he was shocked that this sensibility was disappearing into mass culture. My view, and what I think is interesting for the twenty-first century, is to increase the level of refinement. That doesn't mean aristocracy's ... particular aesthetics; I'm not saying we should walk around like at the court of Versailles, but the court of Versailles in a very situationist sense is a place full of constructed situations. There is this level of refinement, and this level of also taking care of the self and of refining

the self, of constructing the self, and not necessarily having this focus on to the object. The twenty-first century will hopefully be about bringing these lost elements back on a mass level.

This is Tino Sehgal

We are here in February 2005 at my Paris office at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which is also a kind of a library for you, as you said. You have been speaking a lot about politics lately and I've got some questions. Jacques Delors said that we have to re-politicize: that the method of the 'small steps' is no longer enough. He says politics are in a sort of triple crisis: a crisis of the nation state; a crisis of politics which needs to find common values again; and also a crisis of the European construction, which is a kind of a paradox because never before have so many countries wanted to join the European Community. He says that to 're-politicize' means three things: more transparency in public life; an increased democratic control; and third, and most important, the elaboration of a real political project.

So I wanted to ask you about politics and this sort of necessity to re-politicize because you have said many times that actually it is very much a part of politics for you to make art.

TS: OK. Of course you know my opinion on the idea of re-politicization. I don't know this writer. He is not from the arts field?

No. He is a politician. He used to be the president of the European Community.

TS: Oh, Jacques Delors. Now I see. I am always sceptical – this you know – about this idea of re-politicization in art because it implies that whatever we do is not political yet. But from somebody who is from what I would call a parliamentary political field or a lobbying political field, if he now says that there has to be a re-politicization, I am not quite sure about it. I think that

the societies we are dealing with are extremely open societies and that means that each of our actions or choices immediately kind of pass through society. So if he says we have a – I don't know, it went very quickly when you read what he was saying – if he says that we need a transparent society, I think that we have a highly transparent society. If I go out and I take the taxi or if I go out and I buy this and that, immediately it has a political effect, even if this is what he would maybe then dismissively call a small step. But we have highly transparent societies where basically every choice, every move we make, has a real effect and plus is even being monitored through marketing departments or opinion research checking out ...

... every move.

TS: Yes, every move we make. So I think there does not need to be a re-politicization of structures, I think people just need maybe to become conscious of the state we are in, and that, actually, everything matters. Maybe we can say it like this.

You've said before that you don't come from art; we've spoken about your background as an economist, but you also said that in a certain way you always wanted to make politics and to make art is for you actually the most efficient and most sustained way of making politics. Could you talk a little bit about this?

TS: Yes. I think that the parliamentary system we have is maybe quite effective in the sense of short-term politics; it exactly monitors the short-term needs of majorities. Just like the marketing department monitors consumer needs, it monitors the needs of the majority. For the short-term issues it is very effective. But then for long-term issues I think there is a problem. Where do we discuss long-term values which are related to long-term problems? I think that the museum or the cultural field – precisely because they are so persuasive in a transparent society, since our choices are informed by our cultural values – is where you can start dealing with the source, i.e., cultural values, instead of dealing with the administration of the source. Since cultural values are still largely created culturally and not by

the market, the market does not really care about cultural values, a market would accept any cultural value. It doesn't ideologically propose a certain set of cultural values which need to be in place. We tend to associate contemporary society or markets with the production of a certain kind of culture which we then call corporate culture, but I think we have to think of corporate culture as a certain *culture* and not as something which is deterministically produced by markets. So then if corporate culture could be arbitrary, it could be totally something else if people wanted it to be totally something else, I mean, structurally, for a 'market'.

Another world is possible?

TS: Inside the modes of operation we have, lots of other worlds are possible; it just depends on if we culturally want them or not. So all this that Jacques Delors says – and I don't know his book and it would be unfair to speak too much about him because one would have to read it exactly – but when he says, 'We have to do this' and 'We have to do that', in my view, it is all administration. In the end, it is about what people want, it is what people culturally value.

H. G. Gadamer once told me the most interesting things about conversations are moments of silence; the silence cannot be transcribed.

TS: [Laughs]

To switch topics, what is also interesting is that you haven't been recording for two years.

TS: Almost three years.

And then we were recording at Manifesta. Basically your trajectory – in the world of the arts – had only just begun with your appearance in Manifesta and now, as we speak, numerous pieces of yours are being presented at the same time all over the world. So I wanted to ask you if you could tell me a little about the current state of things in terms of your work.

TS: I think that what changed for me from when we spoke three years ago, is that at that time (and I think it is still valid) I was thinking that I was bringing something into the exhibition ground which has been alien to it. So I am bringing in three media basically: singing, movement or dancing, and the spoken word and I am introducing these media into this field where they actually don't belong, but which makes sense since it mirrors and takes into account the break which has occurred in the civilization axiomatic. Today I have slightly changed my perception of this: I think that actually what I am doing is quite media-specific to the exhibition. The exhibition has always been much more about people, that is, visitors, walking through spaces as individuals, being addressed by an art experience as individuals. That is really the innovation of the exhibition, of the public exhibition, without the guided tour. This is the specificity of an exhibition: that it can single out citizens as individuals and not, let's say, like cinema still does or theatre has done for thousands of years, address people as 'the people'. The exhibition has always been much more about individuals and about individuals also seeing each other. When you go back to the beginning of the museum then you see that it is very much about culturally lifting the lower classes, making the lower class change their mode of comportment. The architecture of exhibition spaces managed to single out the individual, which then implied the possibility for individuals to watch other individuals as individuals. So a person of a so-called 'lower class' could watch how a person of so-called 'upper class' behaved: the museum was sort of governmental in the Foucauldian sense. And it's much more related to people than to things, and I realized that maybe one reason why my work has had some impact is that somehow the exhibition becomes fully media-specific.

The historian Tony Bennett has this nice way of putting it: he says that artworks are basically 'props for the performance of the visitors', which is (apart from what I just mentioned) the visitor walking from one space to the next, seeing time passing and at the end realizing, 'I am at the climax of this development.' So it is a kind of a ritual at the end of which the individual is uplifted. The museum is a lot about progress.

What do you mean, 'progress'?

TS: It is about promoting the idea that our time is a progression from other times and that this is something we need to understand to understand who we are. In this view museums are not primarily so much about artworks as they are about visitors experiencing something and especially visitors also physically doing something, which is walking, progressing. In the case of my work, one could argue that the exhibition becomes specific to itself and it leaves out what maybe is, in a way, a bit superfluous, the 'props' so to speak. I would not necessarily say that this is my view, but it has definitely changed how I view my own work.

Can you talk about propaganda?

TS: I think that Jeff Koons said the best thing about propaganda: the only thing one can do is to repeat it. This is my favourite sentence when Jérôme Sans asks him something and he says, 'I like to think of myself as a propagandist', and then Jérôme Sans says, 'What do you think of the real one?' And Jeff Koons says, 'I think I am the real one.' I have no idea how one can put it better. I think *This is so contemporary* works very much like that, even more than *This is propaganda*.

What is interesting also is the question of complexity. Rem Koolhaas says that he has your approach to this propaganda and he wants me to make propaganda for complexity. Do you agree with him?

TS: Yes, exactly, I think. I think that there is a certain laziness in the simplification of the equation 'contemporary technology equals contemporary culture', or informs contemporary culture, or is the decisive determinant in deciding what contemporary is. I think it is very simplistic. Even something like technology has gone out of us as humans, as subjects, or minds, or inventive beings, so I think that we can invent different things, let's say different technologies, maybe technologies of the self or something like that, which are more complex and which are not bound to the restrictions of solid material. At the moment – we don't lack material

things, but to continue the process of complexification or some kind of development, or maybe one could even say progress, I think we have to leave these things behind. I think the increasing complexity will be in our subjectivity and when I say – you won't like that I say this now – that I like very much the way you are in life because you are very artificial; you are crafting or moulding – your subjectivity, your ways of interaction. There are certain conventions of interaction and you tend to use most of them but then there are others which you have somehow made up and people have to live with it or understand it, but you are producing your own games. This is why your way of being is quite interesting for me and why I have come to visit you today. You will have to edit this out of the interview. [Laughs]

Can you talk more about this issue of personality and complexity?

TS: I think that personality is what we want to produce now, personalities. I don't know if Koolhaas means the same thing, but this is what I am interested in: how can we complexify personalities? Because is the ultimate complexification of a personality that we have a notebook today that we can write – emails with? No, that is a tool, no more, no less. That doesn't mean that these tools are not valid or that they don't have influence, it's just how can we complexify more or differentiate more on other levels.

Another thing which is interesting is that you have now started not only to do exhibitions, but you've also started to accept commissions, collectors asking you to do projects, not only in situ – you wanted to go beyond in situ; you wanted to make these projects so that they can actually be collectors' pieces. I wanted to ask if you could tell me a little bit about your experience so far with collectors and where it worked out and particularly also about your Cologne project, which was censored.

TS: [Laughs] We don't know what happened.

Will it be pursued?

TS: [Laughs] It wasn't pursued! I think the whole thing with the works for collectors is for me very interesting because in a way it shifts the parameters even more than, let's say, my work in exhibitions, in a certain sense, because the collectors will normally buy and have something. It relates exactly back to what we were just talking about: a construction or complexification or artificialization of a personality. So now they are suddenly doing things. They are doing my works, which are kind of artificial situations they are creating by their actions, and so I think – one would have to think about this further – but there is this shift from *having* something to *being* something; this old philosophical distinction which shifts from one to the other quite literally with private collectors doing the works.

Then I have had very nice experiences with collectors. They were very sweet about the fact that they have to do something and they wanted to and we rehearsed and they are actually doing them. Then, of course, there is another economy related to buying a piece in a collection which is that you can lend it, for example. My works are context-specific, or some of these collectors' works, or most of them, are context-specific; that means they cannot lend them. There have been points where it has not been so attractive for some collectors when they understood that.

And there was this one piece about the table. Can you tell me about this? Where the couple walk out at the dinner. I love this piece.

TS: [Laughs]

What is the title of the piece?

TS: *Those thoughts*. This is the most recent piece I have done and my idea was to do a piece for collectors where I also try to take into account different attitudes towards collections. So this is a piece for collectors who have a very kind of un-presentational relation to their collections. They don't go round and make a big fact out of presenting their collection; it is just there and if you want to look at it, you look at it but they won't tell you

anything. Even if you ask them, they will be very modest and timid about it. All the other pieces are actually doing something and you look at them, so I wanted to do one which was very, very easy to do – where basically you don't have to do anything, but it's still a piece. So this piece is for a couple, when the collectors have visitors. Let's say they are having dinner or sitting on the sofa. Let's say dinner. After the main course is served, the wife gets up and approximately forty-five seconds later the husband gets up, and they meet somewhere in another part of the house, let's say the bedroom. They hang out there for four or five minutes and then they come back to where their guests are eating and they sit down at each other's places and they just continue eating. If the visitors don't say anything, that's it. If the guests ask, 'Where were you? What were you doing?' or something like that, they say, 'Well, it's a work by Tino Sehgal and it's called *Those thoughts*.' So the work is actually the thoughts the guests had when the hosts were gone. So it's always different each time. If they had any thoughts!

And what about titles? One of the things about propaganda is obviously titles and about complexifying propaganda. The great thing about your titles is that one cannot forget them; like the child who says every morning, 'This is so contemporary.' What is the role of titles? Are titles triggers, are titles carriers, are titles considered part of the works? How do you find titles? What is the role of titles?

TS: It is a good question. I'm not sure. I'd have to think about it longer.

We'll add a little bit more into the transcription!

TS: Obviously, a lot of my titles start with 'This is' – because they can. Because they happen in a certain situation so one can say 'this here', 'this situation is', which is I think different from if somebody writes down 'this is' something on a piece of paper because of course this is just a piece of paper and not 'something'. So when somebody says something, I think there is another level to it. What comes after this is mostly what the piece evolves around; it is like the door into the piece.

A gate.

TS: OK, that's a rather traditional way of seeing it.

A portail [a gate].

TS: *A portail*. That's kind of true. Sometimes my works work like this: when I make a work sometimes I know what the title is and then I try to make the work according to it. Maybe that says something about how important it is. And then sometimes it works the other way round; I know what the work should be but obviously it's—

I have just totally lost what I was saying!

About titles and what the work would be; this is what the work is.

This is Tino Sehgal, this is an office, this is Paris, this is February 2005, it is concrete!

TS: [*Laughs*] It is a lot about where we are. 'Here' has a value, it is important, it matters. It relates back to what we were saying. Sometimes I make the title first and then the work and sometimes it is the other way round, I find, but it's also about creating a system. So let's say if a title is *This is exchange*, then it is my idea of what exchange is. If it is called *This is good*, it relates to the idea of being good but also goods. The titles are like the steering wheel of a piece; they are kind of integral.

ZAHA HADID

I became interested in architecture in the 1990s, when I started to encounter artists who were working on architectural projects, but I only began working directly with architects on projects when I moved to the Serpentine Gallery, where Julia Peyton-Jones was inviting an architect to build a Summer Pavilion for the gallery every year. With Zaha Hadid, we talked about her ambitious approach to space and structures, and her interest in Russian constructivism. The connection between the work of Zaha Hadid and the Russian Suprematist artists of the early twentieth century began with her 1976–1977 graduation project for the Architectural Association: Malevich Tecktonik. Following this interest, in 1993 Zaha Hadid was asked by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York to create an exhibition design for their encyclopaedic show on the Russian Avant-Garde, The Great Utopia. Hadid is bringing together different disciplines. She is having a significant impact on the cities of the future all around the world, something we discuss in the conversations that follow.

Spectacular museums

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *In an article you wrote about the Pritzker Prize, you explained that what characterizes contemporary life is a 'new level of social complexity'. You explained that there are no secret formulas any more, and no global solutions. Could you talk a little more about this notion of 'social complexity'.*

ZAHA HADID: Well, I think the way that cities are used today is very different to the past: they're no longer organized in the same way. They're certainly no longer based around the work ethic – a Protestant ethic actually – where everyone has to go home at a particular time. Cities are no longer occupied by one single type of inhabitant: now there's a whole range of ethnic experiences and influences and a different agenda for living. There's no longer one particular typology and I think this has changed the whole pattern of habitation. As an architect, your client is so many different kinds of people – no longer one single entity – and I think this really adds to the richness of space. What comes out of this is that people want to be in an 'event space': buildings not just made up of one single space, but made up of a field of different spaces. I think it's also very interesting to examine how people encounter each other these days: where they can sit and stand. There's no longer any hierarchy in the way that you can use these spaces.

What about your amazing museum projects? I'm thinking specifically about MAXXI, National Museum of XXI Century Arts, Rome, as well as your project for the Taichung Guggenheim in Taiwan. How does social complexity relate to the design of museums?

ZH: Well, the discussion confronts the idea of the museum as a 'white box', and whether the white box gives you the most flexibility. These days,

you've got variety – the variety of space – because curators make so many different interpretations of space when designing exhibitions. In museums, it's not only a question of how you exhibit the art, but also about how, through complexity, curators can interpret different leads and different connections.

Would you say the Cincinnati museum – the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art – you did was a good example of this?

ZH: The museum in Cincinnati is a 'warren' of a museum. That's a very different kind of project because it's a vertical museum in downtown Cincinnati. The idea was to do two things at the same time: to exhibit art but also to rejuvenate the downtown area, because downtowns in American cities have died because of the suburbs. The interiors of cities have become really derelict: that's why the city of Cincinnati gave this site to the contemporary arts centre to make this museum. The intention was – because the site is so small – to make room 'vertically'. And because it's a vertical space, it means the circulation inside the museum is very important. The many different staircases are essential because they interlock with each other. So you can have an endless variety of spaces within this kind of cluster: from very small rooms used solely for projections, to very large spaces, which are for bigger exhibitions.

Can you tell me about the idea behind the Taichung Guggenheim; it's a massive project, isn't it?

ZH: We're supposed to be doing it like MAXXI, in Rome ... it will be interesting to see what happens, because it is really very large in terms of size and scale. Basically, it is two very large wings connected by a very large lobby. The building pulls in many directions, and so it is built horizontally to connect all the other parts. There are two axes: one of which is an opera house/museum and the other is a city hall and an office building for politicians. The idea is that it all connects horizontally and vertically, so you pull it up to make your offices and you pull it along to connect it to the landscape of the opera house. It's basically a space for very large objects

and different kinds of exhibits. The interior becomes almost an organic experience, kind of like a large chewing gum hill, which you can pull in different ways. I like to think of it as a Martha Graham dance piece.

In terms of museums, there are a number of other projects that have remained unrealized.

ZH: I think there are quite a lot!

How much is realized and how much is unrealized?

ZH: Only a very small fraction has been realized. But that's changing a lot now

... Interestingly, I always thought, 'Why doesn't someone invite me to do museums? I would be a good museum person!' because that's what I did my thesis on. And since then, I've been involved in a lot of museum projects. I mean, we did one here [in Munich] too ... that wasn't realized!

Yes, the Brandhorst Museum, can you tell us a bit about that? It's an unrealized private museum, isn't it?

ZH: That's a very small project. Again, we tried to give an added space to the museum, which was to carve a space inside like an interior street where you can have an internal public space. I agreed to have two rooms – two spaces that would be connected with bridges – and all the connections would lead to separate galleries. It was kind of nice and compact. I don't think Cy Twombly liked the project. [Laughs] That's what I think. Anyway it's OK, friends of mine got it, so it's OK ...

The museum has always played a significant role in your career, from the very beginning of your work and even your thesis, right up to current projects. The same can be said for stations, which again count for many of your past and present works.

ZH: Right now, we have five projects in Italy and they're nearly all 'stations' in one form or another: one in Salerno which is a freight terminal, and we're doing two railway stations, one in Naples and one in Florence. The

Naples station is like a bridge over the rails. You can go down like a stream on to all the tracks. In simple terms, there's a roofscape and then, below, a series of interior spaces that aren't very linear: this gives a kind of undulating space, which brings a lot of light into the station. The idea is that you can move up and down along the spaces to gain access to all the tracks, because you are sitting over the tracks as opposed to just one side of the station or the other. We're doing another station near Bilbao, in Durango. We're also doing a large master plan in Singapore, and two master plans in Bilbao for an area down river which is currently desolate. It's an interesting initiative.

Would you call your architecture spectacular or not?

ZH: If you want to be discreet, don't build a mountain ... You know, it's a very thin line between people saying they should not do exciting or showy architecture and then becoming reactionary. You have to be careful because so many people I know, architects, who are supposed to be very open and liberal, suddenly become rather conservative.

Last question, would you say you are slow or fast?

ZH: What is weird is that, if you look at Vitra [a fire station in Weil am Rhein, Germany], it was all based on movement, but I really wanted a space that was actually very calm. My intention might be to deal with speed but the actual experience might be quite different. I think it's important to have a variety of experiences. I mean, you don't have just one single experience in any walk of life or activity. Certainly the role of the architect is all about variety: in a home it's very different, in a public space it's very different. What I'm saying is that I might use some of these ideas to explore a spatial situation, but ultimately, you end up with something else.

Mobile architecture

From very early on, you've told me that designing mobile architecture has always been a dream of yours.

ZH: Or things that moved, like the kinetic elements developed for the Guggenheim Museum in Taichung, where the interior galleries could be radically transformed; exploring the idea of flying in space, of the skeleton, etc. Both projects could be seen as precursors to this work [Mobile Art Chanel Contemporary Art Container, Paris].

What can we expect from the interior space of the Mobile Art Pavilion in Paris?

ZH: Inside the pavilion there will be a series of ‘spider-webs’, which will be used to support the screens and partitions displaying our research material on ‘towers’.

So the spider-webs will be a display feature – how did you come up with that?

ZH: We’ve been exploring this language since we did the *Elastika* [2005] for the Miami Design Fair and *Mesa* [2007] for Vitra – it’s the idea of stretching things, of veins and branching. Here, we’ve continued that line of research, applying it to an interior space.

So it will be a research laboratory inside. What made you decide to do a ‘tower’ exhibition?

ZH: I thought we should focus on one branch of our research, and this notion of desolation featured in all our geometric work.

The visionary Etel Adnan wrote a beautiful text about your pavilion. She talks about the idea of the pavilion being very cosmopolitan and I thought that was very interesting: a pavilion for the world.

ZH: Yes, because it was designed to travel, it’s not related to a particular context or rooted in one area. It’s rooted in a global context so that makes it much more urban or cosmopolitan.

It can pop up anywhere. In her text, Adnan also says that if one looks at the pavilion, it’s almost like it’s waiting to go on a new

journey. It could go into the desert – that could be nice.

ZH: Or it could go into the countryside. Or you could make attachments to it; it could grow, it could have babies.

That could be great, it could become an entire city.

ZH: At some point placing it on the Thames was discussed.

That's interesting, because when Etel Adnan saw the construction site in Paris she said that she felt as if she had encountered a boat; an incredible force of a stranded boat of some sort.

ZH: Because they build the pavilion like a boat, with a frame with all these things attached to it – it's like a form of boat building. It would have been really stunning because they were going to build it in two halves and then float it on rafts on the Thames, assembling the parts on site.

It would have been a very interesting process. In a previous interview you told me that the museum could go from inside outside into the city. Do you see the pavilion as an urban structure, inextricably connected to the city it's installed in?

ZH: What's interesting is that it's not only about the way the building sits or nests in the urbanism, but it's also how the urbanism is sucked into the interior, so the interior becomes a part of the exterior – even if it's a solid, it doesn't have to be transparent. It happens in a lot of projects.

Was there an epiphany for the Mobile Art Pavilion? Where did it pop up?

ZH: It popped up out of this necessity to making something that was not flat, but I'm also very focused on the notion of an organic methodology, whereby through computing, these forms could be digitally fabricated – that was very interesting. It came through that, not out of doodling.

Could you tell us your feelings about the state of the world at this current moment in time?

ZH: It's a shame because everyone's become so pessimistic, like it's the end of the universe. We're constantly thinking about ecology, we're not allowed to build anything, instead we're renovating all the existing buildings. I was recently in Beijing, which is such an exciting place – they really value the old stuff and the new stuff. It's amazing that in one's lifetime you can watch a city this large rise in front of your eyes.

Maybe it's the moment to leave the earth and to build on other planets; have you ever thought about building on the moon?

ZH: It would take another lifetime.

Yes but it could be great as a project.

ZH: Yes it could be great as a project, but I think the challenge is – and this whole thesis is – to build as if on another planet, but on earth. Almost like a diversion of gravity, rethinking structure, rethinking typology and the urban thing. The whole fluidity is kind of like a shifting cloud, but it is stationed here.

So to sketch the extraterrestrial on earth; that's beautiful.

Suprematism's influence

There are several chapters to your interest in the Russians: your 1976 to '77 graduation project for the Architectural Association, 'Malevich's Tektonik' – a hotel on London's Hungerford Bridge; 'The Great Utopia' exhibition, a show of Soviet avant-garde work at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1992; and now 'Zaha Hadid and Suprematism' at Galerie Gmurzynska, Zurich. How did this interest in the Russian avant-garde come about?

ZH: I first became interested because of Elia Zenghelis, my teacher at the AA [Architectural Association]. He was a great teacher. I met Elia in my first year; he gave a talk about Russian constructivism in 1972/73. He was such a magnetic character: he kind of gripped everybody. It was like a performance.

So he was an expert in Russian constructivism?

ZH: Not an expert, but he talked about it. Then in my fourth year, we were given a project, the Malevich Tektonik. The idea was that if a slide of a sculpture by [Kazimir] Malevich were to be imposed on an urban context, it becomes architecture. So this study was given to us and we had to find a scale for it, we had to give it a site. I imposed a Malevich Tektonik on Hungerford Bridge in London, in a series of horizontal layers.

There was another very early project for a bridge crossing the river that you did at the AA. Can you tell me about that?

ZH: That was another fifth-year project, my fifth-year thesis, the Museum of the Nineteenth Century [1977–8] at Charing Cross Station. On the other side of the river is the South Bank Centre, which is an experiment of the twentieth century. So the idea of the bridge was that it started in one century and straddled the Thames to the twentieth century. It explored the notion that in an urban context, contemporary architecture isn't in the same position as in the early part of the century, where you abolished the ground to start again on a new pattern. Contemporary architecture isn't necessarily sensitive to its surroundings on the one hand, but doesn't destroy them on the other. The Museum of the Nineteenth Century was basically two intersecting beams, one being a hotel and the other being a museum, which is over the existing station. There were ideas about juxtapositions, superimpositions, different kinds of programmes, different adjacencies, an alternative of a different kind of world where you were allowed to do things that you might not do in a domestic or work environment. And it stemmed from my interest in the Russian avant-garde – the idea of the horizontal elevation.

It was unusual for an architect in the 70s and 80s to revisit an artist like Malevich, who said, 'I have transformed myself in the zero of form.' When you revisited Russian constructivism, it wasn't fashionable.

ZH: No, not at all. When they gave me that project, I didn't know anything about the Russians or Malevich, but there was a renewed interest at the time because of the show. Then I read *Ville et révolution* by Anatole Kopp on the Russian constructivists and some books on El Lissitzky.

You went on to become a partner at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture with your teachers Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas and your projects continued to refer to the Russians. What was it that interested you as a practice?

ZH: The reason why the Russians really excited us wasn't their formal and painterly investigations but, in terms of architecture and programme, the fact that they were really inventive. In the 1920s there was a new kind of social order in Russia that made it possible for certain new ideas and new programmes to take place. In the late 1970s, when there was a general economic depression in the West, the cultural background for this work was ripe, in the sense that one thought that one could inject certain ideas that might regenerate it or revitalize it.

In your text for the Zurich exhibition, you say the 1920s avant-garde not only anticipated the urbanist concept of the 1950s, but that projects were designed that anticipated the megastructure Utopias of the mid 1960s.

ZH: Yes. In a way there was a parallel between these two situations.

If one looks at the works that were exhibited in your show at the AA in 1983, like your painting The World (89 Degrees), all these things you'd done in relation to constructivism came together. It was somehow a fusion of all of these things. Many of the aspects – the gravity, the warps, the conversions of the line – all of these things come from constructivism.

ZH: Yes. A lot happened in that year: I did the Irish prime minister's residence [1979–80] and Eaton Place, London [1981–2], and then in one month we did Parc de la Villette [Paris] and the Peak [unrealized spa for

Hong Kong], which was based on the landscape and proposed a new geology or a new ecology. What came into my work at this time was the continuous line that has many different curvatures and trajectories on the same surface, and distortion became more and more developed in the drawings, using different perspectives.

Your drawings are autonomous works!

ZH: What's very sad is that thousands of years of perfecting drawing disappeared in twenty years.

Because of the computer?

ZH: Yes. Of course, we can do things much better now on a computer. But the artistry has gone.

Do you remember the day when you had the idea for the Peak?

ZH: It really came out of previous projects; I don't think it came by itself. In a way it began with the Malevich Tektonik. The brief for the Peak, as a competition, was very similar to the programme for the Malevich Tektonik. At that point, the unit at the AA was dealing with the fact that there were certain modern tendencies and traditions that had yet to be researched and investigated and, because the school was operating as a kind of laboratory for developing new ideas in architecture, this work began. Another thing that was important for us was to understand and develop our work within a twentieth-century tradition – it was important to look back at certain modernist works as a kind of background material for our own work.

Where do you think the biggest connection to suprematism comes in your building?

ZH: The whole idea of lightness, floating, structure and how it lands gently on the ground. It all comes from that.

It's very exciting to see the drawings of the suprematists and your drawings together because one sees the ambiguities of suprematism. Foster has written that in your paintings you

exploited these ambiguities, especially the ways in which its forms can be read as horizontal or vertical and its spaces recessive or flat at the same time. There's this idea of warped spaces. You can see it's 2D and 3D: the two-dimensionality of the wall becomes three dimensions and the reliefs become two dimensions. It's all about ambiguity.

ZH: Yes. That was influenced by the Russians, but not the drawings – by photography like [Alexander] Rodchenko's.

Last time we did an interview we spoke about Rodchenko's flying objects; they're defying gravity.

ZH: Yes. The Russians were very interested in that: conquering the universe. And their work was very cosmic. You see this later with the sputnik and Yuri Gagarin and all the outer-space projects. I think the early twentieth century must have been a very exciting moment, not only in Russia but in Germany and America.

It was a transdisciplinary moment, not just in Russian art and architecture, but also in dance with the Ballets Russes. Can you talk about the display of the exhibition?

ZH: It's like a 3D painting in space; an explosion into the space. In a way, the exhibition is like a conference between linear forms and the landscape. All these new pieces are about landscape and topography, so sitting on the sofa is like sitting in a landscape. The black-on-black wall is a take on a room in 'The Great Utopia' show, which was black and the paintings were black. The only colour here is the red and orange ochre by Malevich. And then there was another black-on-black Rodchenko that connected back to the black-on-black wall.

Richard Hamilton once said that we only remember exhibitions that invent a display feature. One of the reasons why 'The Great Utopia' show is so memorable is that you suspended all the paintings. What prompted the idea of suspending the work?

ZH: It was this idea of floating: suspension in space, not being attached to the wall. It was based on the historic shows of suprematism, but with a new interpretation. You saw all the works in one go. That's why I like the Guggenheim – because of the ability to see different perspectives all at the same time. And I discovered much later that Frank Lloyd Wright did some early provisional drawings of how to show works on the ramps by suspending them.

So that was actually an idea that Lloyd Wright had?

ZH: Yes. I didn't know that. I discovered it later.

It must have been telepathy. You did what he intended to do.

ZH: We used the screens in the museum to show posters, which pushed you to the edge of the ramp. We wanted to use the spiral to tell a story, and the idea of moving seamlessly began to emerge. We wanted to see how you could interrupt that with obstacles. There was always opposition or tension between suprematism and constructivism, between [Vladimir] Tatlin and Malevich, which we brought out. And there was a connection between the two spirals: Tatlin's spiral [*Monument to the Third International*, 1919] and the rotunda spiral. It connects back to Samarra and his spiral and minaret in Iraq, as well as the Tower of Babel.

You've also mentioned that there was almost a religious moment when you opened up Malevich's Black Square.

ZH: Yes. All the curators in the Russian art world were there to witness the opening of the box and the hanging of the *Black Square* at two in the morning. It was an important moment because it was the first time that all the Soviet republics opened up. Now they're all separate states, but then they were still under Soviet rule and it was one country. But they opened up so that you could borrow the material. If you did that show now, you'd find it difficult to get the works because you'd have to borrow them from I don't know how many countries. It was a unique moment.

It was a window of opportunity. We're talking about the Utopia of the early twentieth century in Russia. What about Utopia now? How do you see Utopia now, in 2010?

ZH: It's an interesting time, because thirty years ago there was such a mistrust of, and lack of belief in, architects and architecture. It hasn't necessarily changed that much, but I think there's more optimism. There's incredible wealth and buoyancy. Places like Holland have always built projects; now it's Asia and the Middle East. But no one has combined all the issues in one project for one country. Nobody has done a master plan of a city that has all the ideas in one place, like the ideal American city or Berlin or whatever. There is no ideal place. They haven't capitalized on the opportunity to rebuild Beirut, for example. That's why I think these ideas of superimpositions and juxtapositions within a certain context still prevail, because we're not talking about demolishing the whole place. You have to deal with ideas of layering in order to relate to existing buildings. And I think there should be more research into appropriate housing. How do we live? What are our work spaces like? Is it a green space or a non-space? The impact on the city when there's a new development. It hasn't been done, really.

There haven't been any grand projects like Niemeyer's Brasília, for example.

ZH: I think the Rosga project could have been an interesting thing on a very large scale, a kind of shopping bag. It could have been a very drastic Utopia.

In the constructivist moment in Russia, there was a clear social contract.

ZH: They were people with very ideological politics. Nobody does this type of work now. Maybe it will emerge out of very difficult places like Iraq or Palestine or Medellín or Caracas – these places that are in real turmoil; something will come out of that.

There are exciting young architects there now. I was in Medellín this summer and there are these young architects who are thirty, thirty-five, doing fantastic work, producing reality and change.

ZH: That could be the way it will emerge. Because there's difficulty, there's poverty, there's lack of safety.

In Medellín architecture makes a real difference. They put libraries on top of the slums with cable cars and suddenly it changed a neighbourhood. Architecture can make a real difference. Do you have a Utopia, an unrealized dream for the twenty-first century?

ZH: To go on holiday! No. There are lots of things that haven't been done, from the small detail to the large picture. I'm curious about certain parts of the world, how they will develop. I ask myself, 'How do you manage Cairo?' Or 'How do you sort out Baghdad?' These are very difficult problems.

What's your advice to a young architect?

ZH: I know from my experience that without research and experimentation not much can be discovered. With experimentation, you think you're going to find out one thing, but you actually discover something else. That's what I think is really exciting. You discover much more than you bargain for. So I think there should be no end to experimentation.

How to design an exhibition

My question is about exhibition design. There seems to be an almost forgotten history of exhibition design. To help fight this amnesia, I'd like to know how you started to work on exhibition design and what this medium means to you.

ZH: It started with us doing our own exhibitions and always wanting to create something like a hallucination in that space. The idea for my first show goes back to 1976 or 1977. It was at the AA [Architectural

Association] in London and was one of those student shows where you try to do everything. We made these very large boxes, like architectonic fragments, which ended up in the AA Members' Room. And we were accused of being imperialist by a well-known architect who was speaking there at the time; the criticism was that we had destroyed a perfectly nice English space. It was very curious, to say the least.

Could you tell me a little bit more about these early AA shows?

ZH: We only did one room at the AA; it was something of a grab bag. For example, we did a whole field on the ground, putting down black boards and painting the floor, so instead of a painting on the wall, it was a painting on the floor. The idea was that the floor should be interesting, too – you could walk on a painting and walk on lines. It's similar to our recent installation in one of the gardens of the Villa Medici in Rome [*Meshworks*, 2000], although that was more three-dimensional, whereas the AA room was flatter.

The interesting thing is to test ideas about how you can install art or objects – how you can connect them through a theme. But you can also take some of the ideas you're interested in and try to test them on something like a scaled model. They're not literally trial projects, but obviously they connect to what you are working on at the time. It's also comparable to doing a book: the project becomes a product in its own right. It's the same with installations, where, at that moment, you connect these pieces in a particular way.

In terms of the history of exhibition design, there was a great deal of momentum at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1921, for example, the German constructivist Erich Buchholz even had his apartment transformed into an installation.

ZH: That's interesting, because in Mondrian's studio in New York everything is by Mondrian. It wasn't designed as an installation, but rather as a complete environment. However, the whole issue in the history of twentieth-century exhibition design was also that people used every

possible moment to explore another idea. There was a lot of interest in using every facility to test and make immediate some of the discourse that was taking place. Of course, at the time, there was also the importance of many exhibitions between art, architecture and lifestyle – on how we would live in the future, how we would work. There was an intense preoccupation with future existence, which waned after some time because the future was always seen as rather grim. But I suppose it also relates to all the World's Fairs, where there were many environments designed to explore ideas of transportation – ideas related to industry. So there were different forms of installations or, shall we say, of exploring life in a contained space. Later, people became much more blasé, because they thought they knew everything: they would travel and see things, so they didn't feel there was a need to be confronted with these things any more.

In other words, the 'laboratory years' were over?

ZH: Yes. I hate to say this, but in many museums, the curators have very particular views on how art should be displayed. For instance, the only reason we could do what we did at the Guggenheim in 1992 was because the schedule was very tight; we got away with it because there was no time to change things very much. But the prevailing idea seems to be that you can only see art in a moment of absolute silence – that you can only have one painting here, one painting there, one object here, one object there. Clustering or compactness is really unheard of in the art scene, at least with regard to paintings. But the suprematist paintings, for example, were never intended to be isolated in the white cube: they were part of a field or 'cosmos'. This is another thing I think is a test of a particular environment, because most of these are interior conditions. Through interior conditions you can challenge how people see things. I think the wariness on the part of curators stems from the fact that they think perception is fixed – that there is only one way of perceiving things. They don't see that it doesn't necessarily do harm to the works. I was really shocked by how rigid it is to exhibit work in the museum context.

The white cube carries the ideology of the museum as a 'neutral space'.

ZH: Variety gives you much more curatorial flexibility. A minimalist space can work well for some installations, but certainly not in every respect. The Tate is a good example, because they have a thesis not only about what to have on view, but also how to install art. It works well in their spaces, in general, but I still don't think it does full justice to many of the pieces, because you end up seeing everything in exactly the same way. I don't think it works particularly well for paintings.

I mean, an exhibition is something you want to go and see in person, otherwise you could just look at the exhibition catalogue. First of all, there's the impact an environment has on you, but there's also the effect it has of making you look at a particular work in a particular way. An example would be the 1992 exhibition at the Guggenheim, where we did a five-by-five [metre] room in which we displayed all the works by Lyubov Popova and Rodchenko on Plexiglas walls, so visitors could also see them as a space of differences. We tried to install all of the Russian constructivists almost as they had been displayed at the time, but in different ways, since they were exhibited in different galleries. And we tried to show the journey beginning with the paintings, continuing on through the reliefs that explored the 'culture of materials', and ending with the sculptures and spatial installations. For the five-by-five show of paintings, I felt we should paint a wall at the end of the space black, because I didn't think that Rodchenko's black-on-black paintings could be viewed well on a white background. That idea took hours of negotiations, but it worked extremely well for two reasons: first, it pulled you towards the end of the space, but when you reached the end, you finally started to differentiate between the subtle nuances. And also, I think it's like film and not identical with real life. People always think that normative existence is an absolute – hence this embedding of works in a kind of minimalist space, since this is seen as the most normative and puritanical space. So the interesting thing about exhibitions is that they give you a momentary take on something and allow

you to have the same show installed in many different ways with many different takes.

It's also interesting to bring in the viewer. The first thing that becomes visible in your drawings for exhibition spaces is this real freedom for the viewer. This also relates back to the laboratory years, because at the beginning of modern museums, the idea was that the viewer could move freely across the exhibition space in a non-linear fashion. So it was exactly the opposite of the way it is today, where it reaches its highest point of linearity in the 'audio-guide model'.

ZH: Part of the reason is that in the early years, the work that was being shown was still in the making. And then there was a moment when people felt that modern art was over – that modernist painting, as a period, was finished. As a result, the works became very valuable, and this led to what you could call an incredible 'constipation' in the way they were perceived: 'This is a very important piece and should not be placed next to someone else's work' or 'You can only see this work in one way.' Thus, museums became very dogmatic institutions. It was the end of the idea of the laboratory, of experimentation.

But in your exhibition and museum projects, there's obviously a connection to this modern laboratory. What do you think of this connection, and how is what you do different from what's been done in the past?

ZH: When we did the early, very strange projections, people took them to be pictorial or visual representations. But what it really did was to challenge people's perceptions of how to present architecture, in which mode, and also how your eye travels along the wall, because there wasn't necessarily one point or corner view. This led to the idea that there isn't a singular view, there isn't a singular corner, but rather a multiplicity of views. It also implied a kind of organic organization that is not a closed system. Indeed, the most important thing for me is that these systems are no longer about

completeness; they are incomplete compositions, and not closed systems of organization. All of this has to do with porosity in organization – the idea of absolute space shifted to the idea of different adjacencies where you can see things more than once. I've always found this very intriguing because you can never see the same thing in the same way. When you see an exhibition a few times, you see something differently each time you go. And the interesting thing about installations is that they channel this view; each one has a take on the way you perceive an object or a piece.

Is intensity – or, as you've described it, compactness – a condition for that?

ZH: I think, for instance, that you can move from a room with one piece to a room that has a hundred pieces. There doesn't have to be a uniform layout. Naturally, however, we're also interested in the pixilated field: through repetition, you can organize a space so that it becomes fluid. One interesting thing about museum spaces, or displays, is that you might use standard items, but whether you organize them together in clusters, fragments, or one field, you can connect them differently. This kind of organization can also apply to a larger area, like a big terrain or museum. So the interesting thing about installations is that you can use them to test an idea in different ways, which, in turn, can have a ricochet effect on neighbouring conditions – the next side, the next room.

Cross-fertilization, cross-contamination.

ZH: Exactly. And although the Hayward is relatively neutral, it's not completely so. They try very hard to make it neutral, with white walls and rooms made into cellular spaces where you move from one cell to the next. It's very strange. I think all of this relates to the galleries in warehouse buildings that were converted into these neutral spaces. They work fine when there are two or three rooms, but when you translate them into a space that has fifty rooms, it becomes monotonous. This would be OK if it were extremely monotonous, but because it's only slightly monotonous, it's

utterly irritating. But I'm sure you could do something with it – it could be challenged.

You and I first met over the phone when I was working with Rem Koolhaas and thinking about his exhibition design for 'Cities on the Move' at the Hayward Gallery [London, 1999]. We decided to recycle your previous exhibition design, which is something that happens only rarely because exhibition designs usually just come and go, leaving no traces – a tabula rasa.

ZH: Yes, I agree. When a museum does elaborate installations, they're not valuable enough for the museum to keep, so they're chopped up and thrown away. But they could be recycled or reused. Even if you don't like them, it doesn't really matter – the interesting thing is how other people combine them and how a show could be different with these combinations. For example, the Guggenheim always has these shows in the central space, where they have the artist do a piece. Thomas Krens has kept them all, or many of them, and these have resurfaced as big objects in Bilbao. But it was clear that they had been done for the New York Guggenheim rotunda because they were obviously cruder, rougher than the normal things that these guys do. So it would have been nice if they had been combined into a kind of territory comprised of all these objects, since they're all related to the idea of the rotunda: some of them are meant to hang down from the ceiling, and some are big pieces, like the one by [Dan] Flavin. This piece was stunning in the Guggenheim, because it was supposed to come up to this level, suspended from the ceiling, and because of the psychological impact it has on you – the idea that it might fall on you. And when you know that, as an installation piece, it doesn't touch the ground, that's the most interesting thing about it – not because of the element of danger, but because it's precarious. It's the same with Richard Serra's pieces: what's great about them is not only their size, but also their material. And when they were shown at the Dia Center [for the Arts] in New York, they were very close to each other because the space is so small. It was spectacular because they were so tight, and you know they're made of steel. This

transformed the space completely, and the space had an effect on the pieces, too. That's what's interesting about installations: the dual effect.

Why do you think the excitement about transdisciplinary approaches in museums has faded?

ZH: I think many curators feel that when architectural designers do a space, it conflicts with the art. I find this idea incredibly ridiculous, because how could something be distracting, unless it's done very badly? If you think about major works of art that are installed outside buildings, they're not in spaces that you really influence. You can't change the pavement or the landscape you install the piece in. But the whole beauty of it is to inhabit strange conditions. I once had a great experience when I went to the Reichstag wrapping in Berlin [Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Reichstag*, 1971–1995]. It was an extraordinary event, and very critical historically, because people were not just fascinated by the idea of wrapping an object, but how it was wrapped, how you make something. And it's similar when you do an installation, because you're looking at two things: the work of art and the way the space forces you to move in certain ways, which is what I find interesting about it. There were millions of people there singing and dancing; they flocked to see this building being wrapped, because it was a strange idea. That's when it became clear that the idea of people not enjoying strangeness had finally been debunked.

The difficulty is that curators want to touch it, but don't want to touch it – to change the building. And if you don't touch it, you can't really use it as a gallery. This leads me back to the Guggenheim, because when they have mobiles on display, they always put a kind of low podium underneath them. I've always thought this was ridiculous: the mobile is there and the podium is here, and so if you're not careful, you end up falling on to the podium. When we did the room with the works of CoBrA, that's why we thought of making it into something like a hill, so that it's no longer an object, but a landscape of sorts – a globe with these objects suspended above it. In turn, this led to the idea that the floor doesn't always have to be flat and devoid

of obstacles, as long as these obstacles can be incorporated seamlessly with the floor.

Repeat and innovate

Both Rem and I are thrilled to welcome Zaha Hadid to the London Interview Marathon. To begin, we wanted to ask you about London. Some years ago, you were telling me that, for you, London could almost be viewed as an unrealized project. What's your assessment of the city now in 2006?

ZH: I still think it's an unrealized project for me, and I still feel it's a very exciting city because it's so unpredictable. Perhaps it's more predictable than before, but every time you think you finally know it well, something comes along and surprises you. This constantly shifts your opinion about what you might do there. So in that sense, it's still a kind of educational situation for me.

REM KOOLHAAS: I think you've reached a very interesting juncture in your career – a point that actually very few people reach and where you have to decide whether to repeat things or whether to continue to innovate.

ZH: I feel I'm in a position now to do both. As you know from your own work, there are things you can use as a generic project, but there's still an excitement about inventing things. So I don't think one precludes the other.

RK: Could you be more specific perhaps and give us an example of something you've built that's generic?

ZH: Let's take the MAXXI project in Rome as an example. We're trying to turn space into linear lines and show how they separate and connect. You can look at that diagram in a variety of ways: you can apply it to Rome or to the BMW production facilities, because that line is related to that kind of site. The image could be generic – not only in terms of programme, but also formal language. On the other hand, the years of endless work without winning a single competition gave us an incredible opportunity, providing

us with an enormous repertoire that allowed us to invent. It allowed us to rely on our own experience and previous inventions to move on to the next project. I don't think you have to reinvent the wheel every time.

For me your new MAXXI museum in Rome is a cinematographic experience. Visiting it, I kept thinking it was like being in a film. Czesław Miłosz, the great poet, in Kraków, told me in our interview that he actually thinks that everybody in the twentieth and twenty-first century, no matter if he is a poet, a novelist or an architect, is influenced by the cinematographic experience. I was wondering to what extent films have influenced your buildings ...

ZH: Film is also all about movement, speed and movement through space. I find it interesting that films are also about frames. The way we did our early work, and the animation later – before the possibility of digital modelling – was all about frames and how we move through space frame by frame ... Each sequence is different to the previous sequence. There was no repetitiveness; it was about a fluent movement through space. I remember when somebody from Philadelphia came to the opening in Rome with her sixteen-year-old son, who said: 'It's very interesting. It's really like being in a river.' I was so excited because somebody who was not in the profession could read it better than those who are architects. They are so rigid because of the way that they were educated. Instead here was a kid ... It was very touching, because my first idea was about a 'delta', where you site floats, where the mega-stream become the galleries and minor ones become bridges, which connect to them. He had a very accurate reading of the space.

I wanted to come back to something you said during our last interview ... it was a very surprising thing for me, and has fascinated me ever since. You said that the most exciting developments at the moment are happening in Central Asia. This is something nobody looks at. The region still has not made it into people's consciousness. Can you tell us about your vision of Central Asia?

ZH: The Middle East is a very interesting domain in terms of new projects. Now, they begin to connect to a global idea. So, what is interesting is the connection between digital work and patterning in the Islamic art and architecture. And geometry is what guides them. We always think that Islamic architecture is only about arches, or decorative stuff, but there is actually a connection between that world and very progressive digital work. There are incredible things to be discovered in the Arab world and in Asia. Think of Azerbaijan and its oil resources, like in the Anish Kapoor piece.

Do you have other projects on the go in Central Asia?

ZH: We have had discussions about another project in Baku, and in for a concert hall. But I was sceptical about Chechnya. I am very curious and one should do these projects when he is young. I am quite adventurous and I like hopping around from Turkey to Azerbaijan, going to Armenia ... Each of these large projects melts into the ground. We then go back to the idea of seamlessness, from the street to the interior, to the exterior of the building. When one applies this to a public domain, it can become very exciting. We have a project in Rabat ... We tried to create a museum in Marrakesh for photography, but they thought that it was too wild, too expensive, not for the city, but for the developer, who wanted a kind of odd shopping centre. The idea was to build a shopping centre, but in reality it was a museum ... We have a lot of work in North Africa, in Egypt, Libya, Algiers and Morocco ... also in Jordan ...

RK: I have another, related, question. For the first time, I'm working in the Arab world, and my entry there follows yours by about one year. You're from Iraq, of course, and you're now working in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and elsewhere. What is your feeling about entering the Arab world at the moment of its maximum Westernization?

ZH: It's very interesting. I entered that world many years ago with a bridge in Dubai [Sheikh Zayed Bridge], which has taken a long time to make because they're literally knitting the steel as it comes along because it's so expensive – it's a knitting job. I don't want to be critical of the Arab world.

The Arab world has always favoured foreigners, non-Arabs, because there was a feeling that those people were better informed than their own people – which I don't think has always been the case. Just look at the poor planning work done in Kuwait or in Iraq in the 60s and 70s. The same applies to Saudi Arabia. The work done in Lebanon on the downtown, which is a very relevant story right now, is also problematic. There's been a shift recently that you could describe as a combination of extreme Westernization and a pride in Arab identity. I think I've entered the Arab world during that moment. Nowadays I have the impression that they tend to hire Arabs because they want to associate with someone who's successful in the eyes of the world. I was in Dubai and met with the ruling family, and I didn't have the same feeling as before. Suddenly things are possible that weren't necessarily possible before.

RK: Do you feel that there's a certain 'Arabness' to your work there?

ZH: The effect of 'Arabness', as you call it [*laughter*], coincides with certain interests right now in terms of the whole landscape project, which is related to sand dunes and elements like that. There's also interest in Aldus pixelation and geometry, which relates a great deal to Arab identity in terms of algebra, geometry and mathematics. It's suddenly possible to connect in terms of materials and ideas. So, yes, there is a connection, but not only for me. There's also an interest abroad in these kinds of ideas. And I shouldn't forget the whole idea of the courtyard – I think that could be reinvented again.

RK: Dubai is usually caricatured as Singapore was maybe ten years ago – as a place of excess, Disneyfication, etc. Do you think there's a deeper and more creative background?

ZH: There are some extreme ideas that could be very interesting, and I think it's possible to do them there. The more extreme the idea, the more it's welcomed – not because you want to make a kind of freak show, but because you want to create things that could actually make other places look at Dubai or build up the work. I feel it depends on the ambition of the

individuals in the office. Ambition means pushing boundaries, and I think Dubai is a place where pushing boundaries is possible at the moment.

Could you perhaps give us some examples of projects you're doing right now in Dubai or in the region – maybe examples of projects that are not possible here, but can be realized there?

ZH: Essentially, the projects we're working on are possible in many places. It's the scale of the work that's not possible everywhere. It's possible in China – and maybe in parts of America. Take, for example, the towers we're doing in Dubai, which Rem is also working on. The scheme grew, but it was already enormous. Now it includes a bridge, a stock exchange and museums. It's the scale that's interesting. And it's an idealist skyline, which is interesting.

RK: If I look at your career, there's a first phase, where your own signature, your own work, your own hand, your own rush is incredibly imaginative, inventive and crucial to every single project. If you look at the firm now, and also at how it presents itself, you can see that it's dedicated to digital production and, according to rumour, is awesomely efficient in terms of working on enormous projects with relatively few people. Very few people I know have succeeded in making this transition from being almost a miniaturist to a kind of hypermodern and contemporary organization. Has it been as seamless as it appears? Or have you lost something – and if so, what have you lost and what have you gained?

ZH: I resisted digitization for a very long time. The fascinating thing is that with the three-dimensional work, it wasn't very complicated because the computing almost imitated the way we worked. So it was an interesting transition. Now it's less complex, less transparent, much more opaque and, let's say, real. I still think the work that was done in graphical presentation was originally more complex and less predictable. On the other hand, when we were ten people, we were doing the work of thirty because we worked three shifts. So now we're a hundred and fifty people doing the work of four hundred and fifty. It's very interesting, not because people work

extremely hard, but because, as I said earlier, during the days and years we were locked up in Bowling Green Lane with nobody paying attention to us, we all did an enormous amount of research, and this gave us a great ability to reinvent and work on things. And although it's hard to generalize, it was also exciting to see that young people who came in with no experience, if you gave them enough confidence, could actually be as good as someone who had twenty or even thirty years of experience if there were the right people around to guide them. As you well know, the most important trick is to be able to delegate. You know from early on that you can't do everything yourself; you can do bits of it yourself, you can make people do things the way you want them done, but you also have to rely on their own inventiveness and abilities. Teamwork has been very important to me for a long time. I've always believed in it, and that's why things are manageable.

RK: And yet there are things that only you can do. What would you say you concentrate on now?

ZH: Well, I was in a car with somebody from my office once, and he said, 'You're too fast. I can't write down everything you're saying.' You see, I was on a roll. I don't think I can do things better than other people, but when I focus I can see things very clearly, with no confusion. Put another way, I can confuse people, but I don't confuse myself. That's a great advantage I have. So I might send you off in a haze of confusion, but I'm quite focused. I can plan and organize very well – I'm still very good at that. And thinking of things that are not always predictable in terms of what I would do with a project – I feel I still do that well. And now I can also be charming. [*Laughter*] People always used to think I couldn't.

RK: Talk about charming! [*Laughter*] Zaha, there are two periods in your life – the one you're in now where your work has won great acclaim, and a previous life during which you were neglected – even insulted. But are there aspects of the current condition that you find painful, or of the previous life that you relished?

ZH: When I was neglected or ignored, I always thought it would be a passing phase. There were moments when I felt extremely down, but my depressions never last very long. I'm fundamentally an optimist, and I knew I would eventually come out of that situation. I don't take the acclaim terribly seriously, though – perhaps unfortunately. I think it's fantastic, and I'm very grateful for it, but I don't take it so seriously that it affects my life. I believe that when there are good moments, you have to recognize them and enjoy them, and that's it.

This leads to a more general question, because Rem was asking you about the current moment in relation to your whole career. I'd like to expand on that and ask you what you think of the current situation in the world.

ZH: For me, it's a very interesting moment. However, it's still very difficult for women to operate as professionals. There are still worlds you have no access to. In practice, I still offer resistance all the time, and I think that keeps you on the go. It's not as if I just appear somewhere and everybody says yes to me – it's still a struggle, despite having gone through it a hundred times. It's not necessarily always great, but it keeps you in place, and it also makes you think about and do things in a different way.

To return to the topic of London, one of the ideas behind this interview marathon was to attempt the impossible and create a portrait of the city. I'd be curious to know if you have a personal theory about London.

ZH: The old theory about London is that it's a city made of many villages that merged and created areas of density and a metropolitan condition. We did a project more than twenty years ago at the AA. We drew lines through the city and travelled along these lines. It was a very interesting project because, first of all, it showed that certain things were aligned with each other, but that other things – when you jumped from one level to the next – were tremendously varied. I think everything has become much more homogenized, but there are still major gaps in the city that would allow for

a major urban intervention on an interesting scale. But nobody seems to have taken on the challenge. They either want to look at all of the South Bank as one project or to look at larger areas where you can intervene, but not in a way that would introduce a degree of lightness to the city. I think all the new development is very heavy-handed and not as light as it could be. It's still a fortified city.

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Credits

All interviews have been edited for clarity and length. Some of the conversations in this book have been published before, as follows:

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Louise Bourgeois's art, writings and archival material © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by DACS.

Louise Bourgeois COUPLE, 2009 Gouache and colored pencil on paper, diptych 23 1/2 x 36"; 59.7 x 91.4 cm. Collection Tate Modern Photo: Christopher Burke, © The Easton Foundation

Louise Bourgeois SPIRAL, 2010 Gouache on paper 45.7 x 59.7 cm. Private Collection Photo: Christopher Burke, © The Easton Foundation

Marina Abramovic

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* *Permanent Food* is a biannual non-profit magazine consisting of magazine pages gathered from around the world by many different participants. The magazine was conceived by Maurizio Cattelan and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster in 1995.

† *Purple* is a family of magazines on fashion, prose and interiors and published in Paris.

- * “Untitled” (Passport), 1991 Paper, endless supply 10 cm at ideal height × 60 × 60 cm (original paper size) (4 in. at ideal height × 23 5/8 in., original paper size)

- * Daniel Pearl, a journalist kidnapped and murdered by Al-Qaeda in 2002.

- * Method invented by the surrealists to create works involving a multitude of collaborators by passing the artwork from artist to artist.

* Founded in 1998, AMO is the think tank pendant to the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), which Rem Koolhaas established in London in 1975 together with Elia Zenghelis, Zoe Zenghelis and Madelon Vriesendorp and is now based in Rotterdam.

* Michel Foucault coined this term to refer to the various institutional, physical and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures which enhance and maintain the exercise of power within the social body.

Dispositif is translated variously as ‘device’, ‘machinery’, ‘apparatus’, ‘construction’ and ‘deployment’.

LIVES
OF THE
ARTISTS,
LIVES
OF THE
ARCHITECTS

HANS
ULRICH
OBRIST

